



**PURPLE
ORANGE?**

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"Purple and Orange?" is intended solely for the enjoyment of fans of the ABC-TV series **BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*** and **GALACTICA 1980*** and is an official publication of Battlestar OSIRIS, an unofficial not-for-profit **BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*** fan club, c/o The New Fantasy Shop, 5651 West Belmont Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60634. Submissions and letters of comment are both encouraged and welcomed. Submissions should be addressed to "Purple and Orange?", c/o OSIRIS Publications, 8928 North Olcott Avenue, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053.

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EPISODE GUIDE

The following is a list of all episodes of BATTLESTAR GALACTICA* that appeared on ABC network television during the 1978/79 television season, along with their broadcast dates.

9/17/78		2/18/79	
	"Battlestar GALACTICA"		"Murder on the RISING STAR"
9/24/78		2/25/79	
	"Lost Planet of the Gods" (Part I)		"Greetings from Earth" ¹
10/01/78		3/11/79	
	"Lost Planet of the Gods" (Part II)		"Baltar's Escape"
10/08/78		3/18/79	
	"The Lost Warrior"		"Experiment in Terra"
10/15/78		4/01/79	
	"The Long Patrol"		"Take the CELESTRA"
10/22/78		4/08/79	
	"The Gun on Ice Planet Zero" (Part I)		"Fire in Space" ²
10/29/78		4/29/79	
	"The Gun on Ice Planet Zero" (Part II)		"The Hand of God"
11/12/78		6/02/79	
	"The Magnificent Warriors"		"The Living Legend" (Part I) ²
11/19/78		6/09/79	
	"The Young Lords"		"The Living Legend" (Part II) ²
11/26/78		6/16/79	
	"The Living Legend" (Part I)		"The Young Lords" ²
12/03/78		6/23/79	
	"The Living Legend" (Part II)		"The Long Patrol" ²
12/17/78		7/07/79	
	"Fire in Space"		"The Gun on Ice Planet Zero" (Part I) ²
12/24/78		7/14/79	
	"Lost Planet of the Gods" (Part I) ²		"The Gun on Ice Planet Zero" (Part II) ²
12/31/78		7/21/79	
	"Lost Planet of the Gods" (Part II) ²		"War of the Gods" (Part I) ²
1/14/79		7/28/79	
	"War of the Gods" (Part I)		"War of the Gods" (Part II) ²
1/21/79		8/04/79	
	"War of the Gods" (Part II)		"The Man with Nine Lives" ²
1/28/79			
	"The Man with Nine Lives"		

¹ Two-Hour Episode

² Repeat

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Rather than our now-customary final editorial, this issue of "Purple and Orange?" features an introductory "Message from the Editor" and a special guest editorial by Mary Jean Holmes, editor of the zine Shadowstar. We might add that we are in full accord with Mary Jean's statements about editorial privileges, duties, and responsibilities, which is why we edit all stories we print and have placed certain restrictions on the kinds of stories we accept. We, as editors, must always remember our responsibility to both our readers and our writers; as editors of media-based material, we must also remember our responsibility to the owners of those media copyrights. And we strongly encourage reader comments. (So, please, write and comment! Please?)

Today -- 18 December 1981 -- marks the opening of Windycon VIII and the first Colonial Conclave; we hope it will be but the first of many. In honour of the Conclave, we are publishing some of the best material we have received to date, including some of the finest work by truly exceptional amateur and professional writers and artists. Among the writers, Anne Cecil, John Jones IX, and H. Ravenwood are with us again, continuing the serials begun in previous issues; we are also featuring stories by such familiar writers as Mary Jean Holmes, Sharon Monroe, David Morgan, and others, and are introducing stories by new writers J. R. Janoski and Paul Gordon. And we once again have work from such fine artists as Steve Casey and Mary Jean Holmes (she's good at everything!), and professionals Barbara Fister-Liltz and Frank Liltz.

We hope you enjoy this issue of "Purple and Orange?" and we want to thank you for your loyal support of our zine over the past two and a half years (!) -- has it really been that long? The Colonial Conclave is, in a sense, the culmination of all our work since BATTLESTAR GALACTICA was cancelled as a weekly television series in 1979. Many of you reading this issue have purchased it at the Conclave or ordered it there, and we want to thank you for your attendance and support. Over the past years, we've corresponded with many BATTLESTAR GALACTICA fans all over the United States, and in Canada and Europe as well, and it's been wonderful having an opportunity to meet so many of you at last.

We hope that our meeting has convinced you to try your hand at GALACTICA and related writing and/or art. "Purple and Orange?" is always willing to print material from new writers and artists. In fact, we look forward to it! The Conclave has given us an opportunity to say this to far more of you than we were ever able to reach in our editorials; we trust you will believe us. BATTLESTAR GALACTICA fandom is still quite small; we need to unite to make our voices heard. The Colonial Conclave and "Purple and Orange?" are attempting to provide at least some measure of that necessary unity -- but we cannot do it without the cooperation and support of the fans.

We cannot do it without you.

If you want to write for "Purple and Orange?" we suggest you read GUIDELINES -- WRITING FOR "PURPLE AND ORANGE?" contained elsewhere in this zine. These guidelines are taken from a letter written earlier this year and, as you will discover, are quite simple and straight-forward. If you have any doubts about material you might wish to submit, write and ask us! Please don't simply assume we'll reject something -- after all, every rule has its exceptions.

Other than that, we hope you will continue to enjoy reading "Purple and Orange?" Many of you seem to, but few of you write and say so -- and we fervently wish you would. Once again, we cannot know what our readers like and/or dislike if they don't tell us. With this in mind, we've also prepared a simple reader survey; we'd like you to complete it and mail it to us, in care of OSIRIS Publications. All results received by 1 April 1982 will be tabulated; the findings of the survey will be printed in our late-spring issue, probably available at MediaWestCon at the end of May. Please take the time to complete this survey, and get it in the mail back to us as soon as possible.

On the BATTLESTAR GALACTICA news scene, we are happy to report that WFLD-TV (Channel 32) in Chicago televised the first of its BATTLESTAR GALACTICA movies on 30 October 1981. We understand they have purchased the entire series and plan to air the episodes as two-hour movies on Friday nights. We congratulate the officials of WFLD on this decision, and we wish to extend to them the heartfelt thanks of all BATTLESTAR GALACTICA fans in the Chicago television area.

We also want to thank certain key individuals who did so very much for this issue of "Purple and Orange?" -- Barbara Fister-Liltz and Frank Liltz, for all their fine work in record time...J.R. Holmes, Sharon Monroe, Karen Paull, and Mary Wood, for all their encouragement and help...Anne Cecil

and that marvelous machine of hers...Frank Prohaska, for more than mere words can express...Doris Harrison, for her tolerance ever since this zine began... And last -- but most definitely not least -- our fellow editor Mary Jean Holmes, for efforts far above and beyond...

Without these individuals, and a lot of nameless others, this issue of "Purple and Orange?" would not be in your hands today. Our sincerest thanks to them all, and may the Lords bless them always.



---Joy Harrison
Senior Editor



EDITORIAL PRIVILEGE AND DUTY: TWO HALVES OF A WHOLE

Since I am relatively new to the world of fanzine publication, I thought it a bit presumptuous on my part to address this ever-so-touchy subject. I realised quickly, however, that it is the business of publication to which I am reasonably new, not editing. There is a basic difference between them that it seems many printers of fanzines have failed to recognise.

An editor is one who (1) edits a book, magazine, etc.; (2) directs the policies and contributions of a magazine, newspaper, etc.; or (3) writes editorials.

It seems from observation that a lot of fan-eds are heavily in favour of doing #3 and the latter half of #2, but fail to fulfill in any but the most minor ways the rest of that definition. To edit means to revise and prepare a manuscript for publication or to direct the editorial policies of said publication. Obviously, skills in such matters will vary from 'zine to 'zine, as most fan-eds aren't professionally trained editors. But the business of being one is much more than many fans realise. A publisher is one who issues from the press and offers that printed matter for sale, essentially the businessman of the operation. Granted, most fan editors end up being and doing both. In the professional world, it's seldom that an editor will actually handle the business end of publication; in fandom, it's the norm. Unfortunately, this norm seems to blur the definitions and blind a number of people to the duties that go along with the more esoteric job, that of editing.

The American Bill of Rights grants us freedom of the press, the right to print what we feel without the fear or restriction of government censorship. Sad to say, however, this is often interpreted as the right to print what we wish regardless of quality, value, or its potential effect on another person and/or his property. It permits genuine free thought to flourish and promotes creativity, true, but, sadly, it also encourages less scrupulous people into the printing of libel, offensive material (such as hard-core pornography), and blatant literary rip-off. Take, for example, the National Enquirer. Frequently, it skirts the boundaries of legality for the sake of sensational journalism -- their "right" to make a buck at the expense of another.

Fan publications aren't exempt; there are those who put out questionable 'zines, often for confused reasons. Fan fiction isn't what I would deem a "rip-off," since it is often done without thought of personal profit and with the knowledge of the copyright holders. But even such labours of love can have their tarnished sides. There are 'zines which are printed and sold without consideration for taste, image, or good writing -- stuff put out with all the delicacy of the aforesaid Enquirer. Some of these "rags" are nothing more than the extended feelers of people in search of that elusive and debasing thing they call "ego-boos."

It's a cute term for something we all desire and revel in at times, but there are extremes. A magazine needn't print obscene material in order to be termed "trashy"; there is nothing sadder than an editor who, by going to press, isn't seeking to entertain or provide a forum for his readers, but is rather searching for personal praise. They are as questionable as those who loudly defend their rights without realising that, with right, goes responsibility.

If you choose, for instance, to exercise your right to bear arms, you take with it the duty to learn the use of it and then do so wisely. Being an editor is no different. If you want to print stories based on someone else's copyrighted works -- their property by law -- you'd best be prepared to do it with as much sense and mature wisdom for what is decent writing as you can. If you write and print editorials, you must brace yourself for arguments as well as praise. It's inevitable. With every up, there's a down. The very Constitution that grants the editor his freedom also grants citizens the right to protect what is legally theirs. The definitions and boundaries of intellectual property may be hard to distinguish and difficult to understand, but they exist and must therefore be acknowledged. Also, if you choose to publish editorials, you must recognise that not everyone will agree with you -- and then have the courage and dignity to print those comments without malice or anger. Your readers, after all, have as much of a right to express themselves as you. And there's nothing of value in those rights if those who run the so-called "free" press will only acknowledge one point of view -- their own. That's every bit as bad as undue government censorship.

I have learned throughout my life that nothing is handed to you for free. If you want the right to print a 'zine and be an editor, you must be willing to accept the duties that go along with those privileges. If you want to be free to write as you wish -- especially when employing universes and characters created and owned by others -- you must be prepared to accept it when those owners impose restrictions (I refer specifically to the Lucasfilm ban on explicit sexual or overly violent materi-

al in STAR WARS related writing, a ban I personally support and applaud). The readers also have as much of a right to express themselves as the editor, as do the owners of literary property to protect their creations from potentially damaging press.

But it's only a hobby, you say? No -- it's more. No matter how the fan-ed views it, by printing and selling written materials, they're spreading around opinions, images that will be read by more than a close circle of friends. It's one thing when your pastimes only touch those under your roof; it's quite another when it's very public. And that is where responsibility enters the picture.

Perhaps I'm mistaken. Perhaps fanzines are nothing more than a means of boosting the egos of those who print them and write for them. But when I entered into fan publication, I did so because I felt a gap existed in the world of 'zines, one I wanted very much to see filled. But encounters with people for whom 'zine publication is nothing more than a glorified and much-extended ego-trip have made me wonder if I was wrong in entering into this with a professional attitude. Of course criticism can hurt, but it can also help one to grow and improve. Everyone's entitled to their own opinions, and when the best place to speak out is in a specific magazine -- be it as prestigious as Time or as lowly as my own Shadowstar -- does not the reader have the right to express his views to other readers? And does not the editor -- who, by virtue of editorialising, invites debate -- have the duty to act as an arbiter of those debates?

Haven't we all the responsibility to protect our basic freedoms and rights by being the best editors and informed readers we can be, and by running our publications -- be they hobby or not -- with professionalism and quality?

If you say no to someone who asks to borrow something valuable of yours, don't you expect that to be the end of the matter? If you are propositioned and turn it down, aren't you offended when the person persists unduly?

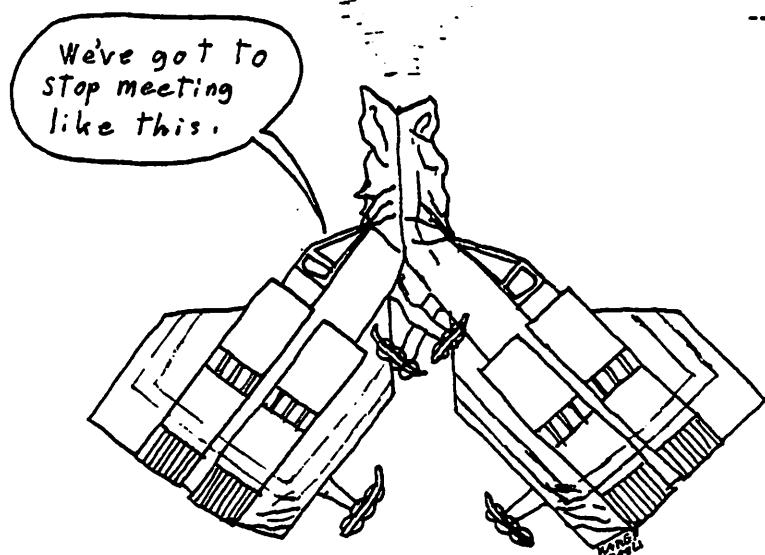
Why, then, is it considered different when editors choose to ignore the bans and protests made by the owners of copyrights?

The answer's simple -- it isn't. It's the same thing. And I for one will be very angry if the pig-headed, immature attitude of a few unprofessional fan editors ruins it for the rest. If Lucasfilm must end up forbidding the publication of all STAR WARS fan fiction in order to protect the image of its product, don't think for a minute that other studios and owners won't follow suit. I wouldn't blame them, but I'd certainly blame those editors for spoiling it for the rest of us, editors and readers alike. They will have infringed on our right to the pursuit of happiness and self-expression. By blinding themselves to the views and rights of others, they infringe on everyone's freedom.

There are many rights implied by "freedom of the press," and even more duties. They are two halves of a whole. Let us never lose sight of that.



---Mary Jean Holmes
Editor, Shadowstar



GUIDELINES -- WRITING FOR "PURPLE AND ORANGE?"

About writing for us, and how to go about it. All you have to do is write a story, log, essay, poem, or whatever, and mail it to us (c/o OSIRIS Publications, 8928 North Olcott Avenue, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053). If we think it's up to our usual standards, we'll accept it; otherwise, we'll return it, usually with an explanation of what's wrong. All rejected material gets returned; nothing we accept, however, gets sent back unless accompanied by return postage and a self-addressed envelope big enough for the manuscript.

Then the editorial staff goes to work. If major revisions or rewriting are required, we get in touch with the writer and have him or her do it; if the changes are minor (mostly matters of style, spelling, etc.), we make them ourselves.

Typing your manuscript helps, of course. It's a lot easier to read, and makes things much simpler for our editors and typists. If you must handwrite, be sure to use only one side of the page, number the pages, and double-space everything -- just as if you were typing it. Print if you can, rather than write, as it's easier to read. Remember, if we can't read it, we can't even hope to print it!

We don't have too many restrictions on stories, although a great many people are doing OSIRIS stories following one developing story line. If you've been reading "Purple and Orange?" (if you haven't been, why are you reading this?), you're probably familiar with it.

Basically, if you're writing with any of the established GALACTICA characters -- or PEGASUS, OSIRIS, DEMENTIA, or any other characters! -- they've got to stay in character. This is Cardinal Rule #1 (and probably the only rule of its kind, at least for us). We do not, for example, want Apollo turning into an extroverted Starbuck-type, or Starbuck suddenly becoming another serious-minded, responsible Apollo.

Also, we don't want any of what the editor refers to as the "comic book superhero" stories you see in a lot of other fanzines; some people call them "Mary Sue" stories after a long-forgotten (and probably best-forgotten!) STAR TREK prototype, we're told. After all, even Morgan, the telepath aboard the OSIRIS, crashes on occasion (more often than not, we're beginning to think!). But we've already had to send several stories back because of this sort of thing; maybe some people just don't know how to write anything else.

Of course, if it's a parody...

Safest bet for most writers who are trying to create their own characters is to put them aboard the OSIRIS. It usually doesn't take too much revision from a GALACTICA-based version of a story, just involves a new setting and a few name changes. And it works pretty well, too. You see, we already know most of the principal crew members aboard the GALACTICA. Unfortunately, people trying to create additional characters for her tend to make the mistake of putting them in highly visible positions -- when we know they weren't there! However, we don't reject new GALACTICA characters if they're believable...

When you create a new character, write and let us know about him/her/it. Who is this character? What does he/she/it look like? Try to include a drawing or sketch if you can. How old? Where from? What are some of his/her/its interests and pursuits? Remember, too, that background on a character always helps, so try to tell us something of the character's past history. And don't worry if this part of writing takes a while -- we still don't have profiles on all our oldest characters yet! Below is a sample of a well-done character profile (minus illustration). Figures it'd be well done -- it's by a pro.

Above all, don't get discouraged. Editors, if they're any good, do a lot more than cut stories to

bits; we also try to help writers, to show them how to improve their stories, to make their writing the best it can be. And if someone else writes something diametrically opposite to what you're doing -- so what? We can print both sides!

We're looking forward to hearing from you!

Major Dion: A Profile

Name: Dion

Rank: Major

Post: Second Archivist, Battlestar OSIRIS

Description: Five feet ten inches tall; dark hair, eyes, and complexion. Large bones but with the flesh stretched rather thinly over it. Numerous scars, though no major ones on face. Still moves very well, keeps excellent muscle tone, and has deceptively good reflexes.

Biography: (see story, "The Sin of the Father," in the BLUE ONE issue of "Purple and Orange?") Born Scorpio; father a Fleet engineer, mother an Archivist (lost in space when Dion was eight). Entered Academy for training as fighter pilot at seventeen. Distinguished record as fighter pilot (seventy-eight Cylon kills) until age twenty-six, when retired due to severe combat wounds. Scholar Candidate at Academy of History from age twenty-seven; graduated five yahrens later with one of ten highest marks ever recorded. From age thirty-two, twenty yahrens on Faculty of Academy of History. Age fifty-three to present: Second Archivist, Battlestar OSIRIS.

Character: A rather austere and silent figure, at least in public, more respected than liked (although with few real enemies). Does not care to talk about his past, which is unknown to most of the OSIRIS crew, and avoids like the plague the fighter squadrons, both pilots and tech crew. Something of a workaholic, always willing to take a duty shift for other Archivists; near-eidetic memory.

When he drinks, he does hold it well -- he has put a fair number of fellow crewmen young enough to be his children to bed after a lively evening. Not celibate, and indeed might be quite popular among the younger women looking (consciously or otherwise) for a father figure if he didn't regard this as robbing the cradle (self-imposed lower limit is about thirty yahrens, although there have been exceptions).

Those who know who he used to be wonder if the fires in him are burned out or just banked down. After all, he was one of the best and most aggressive fighter tacticians in Fleet history, and while he may no longer have the reflexes to put a Viper through its paces as well as Diana or Morgan, he has added an encyclopaedic knowledge of military history to whatever he has kept.

SOUL of a SOCIALATOR

SHARON MONROE



"Soul Of A Socialator"

(By Sharon Monroe)

"Over here, Cassiopeia!"

Cassie smiled hurriedly at the man in the life pod and dashed to Dr. Salik's side. It was another of the technicians from the fire control team. They'd managed to control the potentially explosive fires near the solium storage pods, but there were over two dozen men and women injured. Life Centre was swamped with burns, broken bones, minor concussions, and smoke and chemical near-asphyxiation cases.

Salik grabbed the pain-killing hypo from her hand and continued his examination of the pale youth on the exam table.

"Tell Paye not to put away the bone laser yet. This kid's got a broken arm, and some hairline fractures through his wristbones. Go ahead, Jenna can help me with this."

Cassiopeia nodded and ran to grab Dr. Paye's attention. In a moment, Jenna was dashing by for more bandages, and the two blonde med techs were helping Paye set up the bone laser for the injured young man.

"Cassiopeia!"

Cassie looked up, saw Salik across Life Centre, beckoning to her. Her shoulders drooped for just a micron, then she smiled apologetically at the group around the bone laser and hastened away. This whole duty shift had been one long dash from patient to patient, and the rest of the staff was as harried as she was.

"Yes, Doctor?" she asked, brushing aside the hair she hadn't had time to comb in centars.

"Help this young man to a bed in the other chamber, then take a break. You've been working pretty hard. There's only a few people left here, and we can manage them in a few centons."

Cassie nodded, dropped a professional smile on the golden-haired man sitting on the bed. Man? He wasn't really much more than a boy. Cassie doubted he was over eighteen yahrens old.

"Hi. I'm Cassiopeia," she said, introducing herself as Salik hurried to his next patient.

He smiled back, very shyly, almost blushing. "My name is Dillon," he blurted out.

He rose to unsteady feet, and nearly fell back on the bed.

"Oh, careful!" Cassie offered him an arm, helped him to a steadier stance. "I understand you're a bit of a hero."

This time, the boy did blush. "I just did what I had to," he said, looking embarrassed through his shrug.

"You saved two of your friends' lives, if I heard right," she continued, with the right amount of praise in her voice.

The boy seemed tongue-tied, and didn't say another word as Cassiopeia helped him to the next chamber, then into a bed. He pulled the blanket over his bare chest as if he were afraid she might notice he was a man.

"I'm a med tech, Dillon. You don't have to be embarrassed around me," she said, trying to be professional and reassuring at the same time. "You just get some rest for now. I'll drop in on you later, if you like."

He nodded and buried his head in the pillow, eager to obey her instructions.

"Thanks, Cassiopeia." He watched her walk away with longing in his blue eyes.

"Hi, Cass. Ready to go?"

Cassiopeia looked up in surprise. "Starbuck! Oh, no! I forgot! Do you think we could postpone that excursion of yours? I've been so busy here, I really think I'm too tired..." She turned her most appealing gaze on the tall Warrior.

Starbuck managed to hide his disappointment, shrugged his shoulders, and smiled. "Okay, I guess, if you're too tired. Can I walk you back to your quarters?"

She smiled gratefully, and took his arm as they left.

* * * * *

Cassie made a point of stopping by the shy young man's bed at least once every duty shift. For some reason, Salik didn't release him when the others were gone.

"Hi, Dillon," she said gaily. "How are you today?"

"Hi," he said eagerly. "I feel great, but Dr. Salik wants to keep me here for a few more days. I want to get back to my team."

"You have to obey doctor's orders," she said with a smile. "Excuse me for a moment, will you?"

Dr. Salik was still frowning when she reached his desk.

"Is something wrong, Doctor? I was just talking to Dillon..."

Salik silenced her with a wave of his hand. "No, nothing's wrong with that." He sighed deeply. "Poor kid. We just finished all his exam and lab reports. In saving those two friends of his, Dillon exposed himself to some hard radiation. He's got maybe a sector to live." The unhappy man threw the readout to his desk.

Cassie turned pale. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Have you told his family?"

Salik shook his head. "That's what's even harder. He was the only survivor of his family. There's no one left to tell. And there's no one to tell Dillon, either."

"What do we do?"

Salik looked her square in the face, drawing a deep breath. "I guess I tell him. I'm his doctor, much good it's doing him."

Cassie watched in silence as Salik slowly walked over to stand at Dillon's bedside. Salik spoke quietly; she couldn't hear what he said, but it was obvious when the young man knew.

"No!" Dillon shrieked, nearly throwing himself at Salik. "You're wrong! You've got to be! I feel fine! I'm not dying! I can't be dying!"

It took a sedative -- and two techs to administer it -- to get Dillon's hands off the doctor's neck, and get him back in bed.

Before she went off duty, Cassiopeia stopped to see Dillon. He was lying very still, staring at the ceiling, eyes wide and tear-filled. Seeing the lost, lonely agony there, it was all she could do to keep herself from crying.

"Hi, Dillon," she said very gently. The room was on night simulation; his pale face turned to her, nearly sobbing.

"Did you know?"

"Not until the moment before he told you," she said softly.

"I don't want to die, Cassie, I'm afraid of dying. Please don't let me die."

His words went straight to her heart. He reached out a hand and grabbed her arm. She put both arms around him, holding him close. After a moment, he grabbed her tighter, in an almost painful clutch, the hold of a fearful child clinging to the only good thing he'd ever known.

"I wish I could help you," she murmured. "I wish there was something I could do to make you safe and well."

"I'm scared of dying. I'm scared of the dark. I don't know what's on the other side, and I don't want to find out. Don't let me die. Don't let me die."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Cassiopeia stayed on duty late, waiting until the young man finally fell asleep before leaving. When she arrived at her quarters, she found an annoyed Starbuck waiting for her. She couldn't muster a smile; her heart still ached with Dillon in Life Centre, dreaming of death.

"You forgot again. Must've been another hard shift."

"Harder than you know, Starbuck."

"Would've been nice to let me know. I'd've taken Apollo and Boomer up on their invitation. I'm sure Athena would've been free to join me."

"Starbuck, please don't be so childish. I don't have time for it tonight. If you want to take Athena to the triad finals, go ahead. I just don't feel up to it."

"You don't feel up to a lot of things these days. Besides, the game's already half over."

"I'm sorry, Starbuck. That's all I can say."

After a moment, Starbuck nodded. "Me, too, I guess. Didn't mean to upset you. I understand about work shifts being tiring. Sleep well, Cass."

She smiled gratefully. "I'll try. Good night, Starbuck." A gentle kiss, and Cassiopeia was glad to retire. Starbuck drifted back to his quarters. Suddenly, he didn't feel much like watching the triad finals, either.

* * * * *

Several days passed quietly. Cassie spent a lot of her time on duty, in Life Centre, and often found herself stopping by the dying fire control technician's bed. Dillon was always glad to see her, almost pathetically so. He was only eighteen, and he was very alone, and he saw her as an angel. When she was there, he felt brave enough to face anything. When she was gone, fear closed in on him like a vise.

One evening, dark and quiet, under night simulation, he knew the time had come.

"Cassie?" he whispered.

Across Life Centre, filling in medical reports on the techs already released, she heard him. Cassiopeia left a word half-written, to stand by him.

"Yes, Dillon?"

His eyes were a strangely bright blue in the dim light. "Can I ask you a favour?" his weak voice breathed. His health had deteriorated almost before her eyes that last day.

"What is it?"

"There's nobody else to do it. I don't have any family, and I wasn't with Fire Control long enough to make any close friends. Would you stay with me? I think it's almost time..."

"Of course I'll stay with you," she whispered back.

After several moments, he spoke again.

"Would you sing something for me?" he asked.

"What do you want to hear? A passing song?"

"No." He shifted quietly to a more comfortable position. "I'll never get a chance to love, or to seal to anyone. But I think I would've liked sealing with you. No one's ever sung me a love song..."

"Cassiopeia, would you sing me 'The Sealing'?"

She smiled through tears and nodded at his entreaty. "Anything you want." Her voice was low and husky at first, rising quickly to the beautifully clear tones she always sang with.

*"In the stars in the sky
See the love with lover's eyes;
In their light there lives tomorrows yet untold..."*

Her voice was an angel's; he held her hand tightly, eyes bound to her face, wide and glowing...



* * * * *

"Aren't you bringing Cassie?" Apollo asked in astonishment. "I don't believe it. We're going to the RISING STAR, and you're going alone?"

Starbuck shrugged, trying to avoid commenting.

"Something's definitely wrong," Boomer probed with raised eyebrows.

Sheba stared at the two men. "You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"At least Starbuck respects Cassie's grief. One of the boys on the fire control team two sections ago has radiation poisoning, and she's been hit pretty hard. He's just a kid."

"What?" Starbuck broke in. "What happened?" He grabbed Sheba's arm, staring in astonishment.

"She didn't tell you, either? No wonder you've been walking around like a cloud of doom. Starbuck..."

He didn't hear any more. Convinced she was losing interest in him and gaining it in someone else, it hadn't occurred to Starbuck to look for any other answer. Now he hastened to Life Centre; he knew she'd be there.

"What an idiot I've been!" he cursed himself. "I should've known!"

* * * * *

"Love me forever, or else forever dies,
 But love me for today, Love,
 And each day the sun will rise."

Cassie's voice died away at the end of the beautiful sealing song. The hand clenched in hers was still; the eyes had closed only a moment before. Tears blurring her own vision, she checked for a pulse. There was none. She lay his hand gently at his side.

"Good-bye, Dillon. I wish I could have done more." Her voice broke, and she turned away, blundering into somebody who'd entered the room in absolute silence.

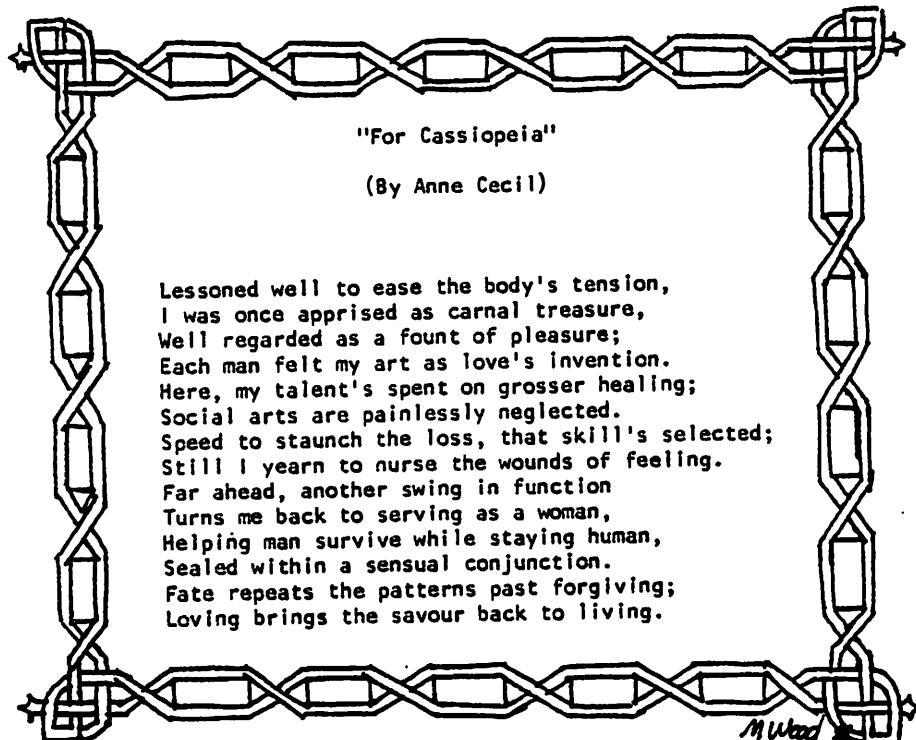
"Cassie," Starbuck whispered, putting his arms around her tenderly. "I didn't know. I didn't understand about Dillon... I'm sorry. Will you forgive me? I just didn't know..."

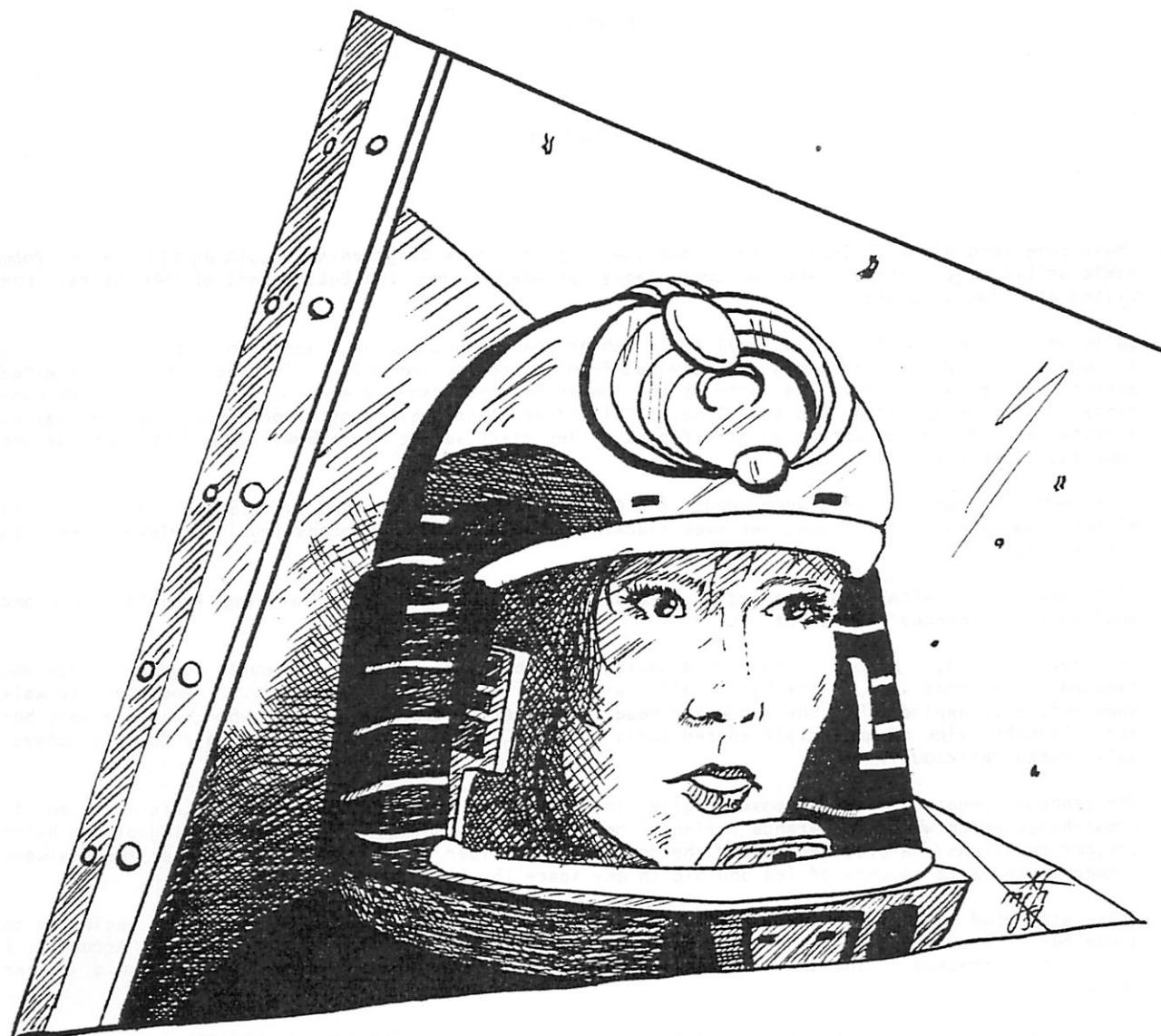
"Oh, Starbuck, he was so young!"

She couldn't continue. Cassiopeia buried her face against Starbuck's chest and let herself cry. He held her close, and let himself shed a tear for this young man, and remembered another young man.

"I know. I'm sorry..." The darkness had never been so empty.

(Lyrics to "The Sealing" used with the permission of Julia Ecklar.)





Easy Looking
Anne Cecil

"Easy Looking"

(By Anne Cecil)

Part II

"Have some more M'dori," Captain Laia urged, waving the flask of greenish liquid across the rec room table at Lieutenant Freya, who was comfortably sprawled across the better part of two chairs, one tilted at a rakish angle.

Gally was sitting quietly at a small table behind them, munching on a sandwich and trying to sort through a pile of micro-chips she'd salvaged from a derelict com unit. The rec room was deserted except for the two tables. The party at the longer one included the ever-popular, ever-correct commander of Purple Squadron, Captain Diana. Gally'd accepted a glass of M'dori, but chose to stay at a distance from the concentration of officers. Her glass sat at her elbow, barely touched, as she squinted closely at the chips.

"I'm getting drunk," Freya announced, and Gally looked up in concern in time to see her friend blinking owlishly at the flask, her eyes tracking its swings as she unconsciously mimicked them with her own glass.

"You deserve to, after that landing," Laia said firmly, successfully catching Freya's glass and pouring in a generous portion of liquor.

"You certainly do," echoed Diana with a decided nod that made her long red curls bounce. "How you managed to get that ship in the bay at all, with half the undercarriage gone... And then, to walk away before it exploded!" She shook her head in admiration, giving Gally, who could see only her back, another view of undisciplined red curls swinging loose. At least, her hair doesn't behave, Gally noted maliciously.

The redhead appeared slight, almost fragile, in contrast to the two larger women. Laia was a solid, broad-boned woman whose appearance reflected her capable reliability but showed nothing of the hair-trigger reactions she produced behind the controls of a Viper. Freya was simply large; there always seemed to be extra amounts of leg and hip in any space the Lieutenant occupied.

Freya attempted to explain about her narrow escape in the landing bay, but words were beginning to elude her. "Actually..." She paused, then peeked at them over the top of her glass. "Actually, I ran," she confessed. She shivered slightly at the memory, and took another healthy swig of her drink.

"It's amazing how much damage those Wasps did," Laia sighed, copying Freya's motions.

"Wasps," Diana remarked, refilling her own glass with quick, precise motions. "That's the official name for them, then?"

"As good as we've got," Laia shrugged. "It seems to fit. The damage... You realise most of my squadron has nothing to fly! Freya's ship is completely gone, Lavanna's and Tirus's need major engine repairs, and Gideon's has no armament. That leaves me with my own Viper, Corbin's patrol, and the trainer, which is in poor shape anyway."

Freya giggled. "You forgot Gally." She waved her glass in Gally's direction.

Gally attempted to pretend she was deeply engrossed in the study of chips, and hadn't been listening at all.

"Ah, yes." Laia's tone reflected a certain sense of suffering. "How could I forget Galatea?"

"Her ship'sh awright," Freya beamed beatifically. "Landed jus' fine."

"Fine." Laia considered the word. "That's a way of putting it, I suppose. Not a way I'd use." She bit the words off tightly.

Diana turned in her seat so she could bring cool green eyes to bear on Gally. "Her ship seems to be all in one piece," she said carefully.

"Sergeant Galatea!" Laia used her command tone.

"Yes, sir!" Gally jumped, knocking apart some of her carefully sorted pile. She stood up, and came around to stand in front of the longer table, following Laia's emphatic hand gesture.

Laia cleared her throat. "Would you care to explain your, uh, interesting manoeuvres during the recent battle?" Captain Laia was being determinedly patient; she wrapped her hands neatly around her glass and looked Gally square in the eye.

"Explain?" Gally asked in genuine innocence. "Oh, you mean that little problem with the stabilisers and...?"

Laia's hands tightened on the glass. She took a deep breath and smiled sweetly. "First. During the battle, you went into a tight roll. True, you managed to take out a Cylon while you were rolling, but the impression I received was that you were not in complete control of your ship. Certainly, you could have deployed your ship more effectively, preventing some of the problems the other members of the squadron had. Second." She paused, and seemed to reach for calmness. "Your landing approach was definitely unorthodox, and exceedingly dangerous." Her lips unconsciously formed a grim smile, and her blue eyes had a wintry cast. "If you did that on purpose, as some kind of joke, or as a dare, then you are out of Orange Squadron -- now." Gally winced involuntarily at the implied violence in the force behind that word; it was more startling because Laia was always so even-tempered.

"It wasn't like that, sir," Gally hastened to reassure her. She straightened her shoulders in her best militaristic brace and spoke into the ominous silence. "The stabilisers on my Viper weren't working right during my last flight, so I attempted to fix them. My fix was working fine up until I dropped it during the fighting." Gally tried to keep a properly stiff face, but a small, nervous grin escaped her. "I managed to get it back under control, but only partly. One of the chips I'd used came loose, so I used the point from one of my insignia to push it back in place. It was one of the integrator diodes, of course, and because it was loose, the circuit was in partial inversion with the flux of the energising circuit on the..."

"Stop." Laia held up a hand. "Suffice it to say you had some hardware failure that was responsible for your acrobatics." She looked down at her glass of M'dori as if hoping for inspiration. After a moment, she raised her head, her face tired, stress lines making it seem older than her yahrens deserved. "Why didn't you notify the OSIRIS that you were having trouble, so they could prepare for a possible crash landing?"

Gally felt her face redden, and she blinked furiously. "If I had expected to make a crash landing, I would have notified them, sir." She raised her chin proudly. "I was sure I could correct the problem, sir." The last word hung in the air for several microns, as Captain Laia locked stares with her.

"She made it, an' thas not felder...fegler..." Freya was having trouble with her attempted defence. She looked mildly surprised at her tongue's disobedience; M'dori was having its usual effect on the unwary imbiber.

Laia conceded, waving her glass wearily. "Sit down, Sergeant. And in future, report any problems to the OSIRIS -- whether you are sure you can correct them or not." She spoke slowly and with heavy emphasis. "Is that entirely clear?"

Gally opened her mouth to argue against the unreasonableness of bothering the busy people on the battlestar, but the look on her Captain's face made her shut it again. She wilted a little, and said only, "Yes. Sir." Freya swung her feet off the near chair and pulled Gally down into it, nearly losing her own balance in the process.

Diana hid a small smile, and did her bit to cover the awkwardness. "The fact remains," she reminded Laia, "Orange Squadron is in bad shape. And if Purple Squadron runs into these Wasps, we could wind up no better off." Her slender shoulders quivered at the idea, and she took another sip of M'dori to ward off the sudden chill.

"Discussing the supply situation again?" A strong, virile voice rang pleasantly through the room.

All four women looked automatically toward the doorway, where a tall, blond man stood, regarding them with a broad smile on his handsome face. His green eyes sought and held Diana's, openly acknowledging the special relationship between them.

"Come join us, Morgan," Diana invited with a wave. "We're trying the M'dori cure for our troubles. We haven't come up with any more productive plan." She hooked another chair with a shapely leg, nudging it into place beside her. That chair would have fallen over if I'd tried to do that, Gally thought enviously.

Morgan moved forward, his long stride carrying him quickly away from the door, and the women saw he was not alone. Hidden in his shadow was another of Purple Squadron's Warrior-pilots. The second man hesitated in the doorway, watching Morgan's confident movements expressionlessly.

Diana frowned, as if in mild annoyance, but she said, "Baleron, you might as well join us, too."

Gally watched the Warrior walk stiffly forward, contrasting the battle-scarred form with the lithe, agile, almost arrogantly handsome youth she'd met yahrens ago at the Caprican Academy. It was still easy for her to forget the mangled cheek surrounding the cyber eye that served as the left side of his face. Baleron was the only person on board whom she'd known before, excepting the refugees who'd come with her. He had been one of the few people at the Academy who'd never remarked on her lack of social graces. Their relationship had been made easier by its simplicity, since, of course, he was madly in love with her gorgeous roommate. Now her roommate was in another part of space, and Baleron had changed, outwardly, at least.

Gally noted the uneasiness his appearance caused, and his reaction; he took a seat slightly away from the others. If they'd known him before, she was sure, they, too, would see that firm jaw and straight nose, the velvet brownness of his remaining real eye, and not be put off by a few stray scars.

"I heard the description of those new ships from the bridge -- Wasps, you're calling them? -- and I was curious to hear more, first-hand." He seemed to be apologising for joining them. "Were they really so dangerous?"

"Very," Laia said shortly, and went back to studying her drink.

Morgan seemed content to look at Diana, who was reflectively rubbing the side of her glass. Freya seemed to be considering sliding into her glass.

Gally, who'd been slouching in her chair, straightened and said brightly into the silence, "Actually, their firepower isn't as great as a Viper, or a Raider. The real problem is their manoeuvrability. They have almost exactly the same configurations as a Viper, and very nearly the same capability when it comes to tight turns, speed, and sudden changes in direction. It looks remarkably like the Cylons took a downed Viper and attempted to copy it. Maybe the reason their weaponry is poorer has something to do with the condition of their model."

"Nex' time, you'll hav't'ask 'em." Freya giggled at her own joke, sending waves of dark hair bouncing in all directions. Somehow, her state of mild inebriation had loosened not only her tongue but also that cloud of dark hair, normally shoved and pinned into a reasonably disciplined knot.

Baleron raised his good eyebrow at the Lieutenant, whose cheery grin was becoming obscured by waves of hair. Freya ineffectively pawed some back, and up-ended her empty glass. "More?" she asked hopefully.

Laia and Diana exchanged frowns, then Laia sighed. "She hasn't got a ship to fly, so why keep her sober?" She poured more from the bottle into the glass Freya clutched tightly.

Gally kept her mouth firmly shut, ignoring the two Captains' behaviour, resolving inwardly to stay sober so she could see her friend safely back to her bunk later.

Baleron managed to suggest he was shocked by this unWarriorlike conduct, without actually saying anything directly. He shifted in his seat, edging farther from the group, and addressed the centre of the table. "The supply situation is becoming critical, then?"

"Critical isn't the word," Laia said with a soft moan. "Disastrous might be closer, though I'm not sure that's strong enough, either." She propped her chin on her hand, elbow braced on the table, and returned to dismal contemplation.

Baleron pursed his lips, unconsciously rippling the scar up the left side of his face. "Surely there must be something we can do," he said vigourously.

Diana averted her eyes, evidently repelled by the scar, but she answered seriously. "There aren't any Viper factories out here. The Cylons would've made very sure of that before anything else. And we really don't have time to go build our own," she added more facetiously, trading a sidelong glance with Morgan, who responded with a small smile.

"Ummph!" Freya made a strangled sound, which evolved into words after a micron. "Shipsh. We need shipsh?" She looked around for approval, waving her glass gently. Gally nodded helpfully, and that seemed sufficient encouragement. "Who'sh got shipsh? Cy-lons, thash who. We shou' jus' go take shome a theirsh." She beamed enthusiastically and waved her arm again, slopping some M'dori on Gally's uniform, where it found a home between a grease stain and what looked suspiciously like glue. Gally mopped at it half-heartedly with the edge of her sleeve, while Baleron's face convulsed evilly in what Gally recognised as a suppressed laugh, and Laia closed her eyes in disgust.

Diana glanced reflexively at her own spotlessly trim uniform, then gave a wry chuckle. "With ideas like that, who knows how far we'll go?"

"Any idea should be examined for merit, no matter how ridiculous it seems on first appraisal," Baleron lectured, steepling his fingers in his best professorial pose.

"Actually, it's a good idea!" Gally sat up suddenly, as the brilliant simplicity of what her friend had mumbled penetrated. Her movement caused Freya to begin listing in Laia's direction, but Laia simply put out a strong arm and pushed her back. "If we could raid them, and take some of their ships..." Visions of replacement parts filled her imagination, and her mind began to churn.

Laia said patiently, "We wouldn't be able to fly them." She obviously hadn't understood; her face was still glum.

Morgan offered a good-natured suggestion, but his tone was half-joking. "Maybe Hannibal could work up a crash course."

Diana and Laia winced, and Diana threatened Morgan in mock anger with the nearly empty M'dori bottle.

Gally ignored them all. "The Wasps," she reminded them. "Why couldn't we fly them, if they really are imitation Vipers?"

Diana brightened, her attention caught. "If they really are based on Vipers... Laia?"

Laia twirled her glass again, thinking before she answered. "It might be possible," she said grudgingly, shrugging broad shoulders. "They were being run by only one Cylon, and the glimpse I caught looked like standard issue Cylon, not one specially wired for pilot duty."

That gave Gally another thought, one that had occurred to her before. Impulsively, she asked aloud, "I wonder why they've always imitated us, and put Cylon robots in the ships as pilots, instead of just creating intelligent Raiders?"

Morgan shuddered, and raised a glass. "Thank the Lords of Kobol, those machines don't have your imagination." For the first time since he'd joined them, he looked directly at Gally, as if he were seeing the flow of diagrams and circuits flashing through her head as she considered how easy it would be to integrate a Cylon directly into his ship. She shivered uneasily, looking away from those penetrating green eyes; silly to let him make her uncomfortable, but it always happened.

Baleron ignored the distractions, intent on exploring Freya's idea. "So, it is a possibility that we could fly the Wasps, if we could capture some," he summarised pedantically.

Laia shook her frazzled head. "And where are you going to find them?"

"At a Cylon base, I assume," said Baleron reasonably. He leaned forward, turning his face so the unscarred side was toward the two Captains. Unfortunately, this made him seem to be looking at a point somewhere over Freya's head. Laia had gone back to studying her glass, and Diana and Morgan were engaged in some kind of half-whispered conference over who was going for another flask of M'dori. Gally heard Morgan whisper something that sounded like, "...but you drank it."

Gally looked at Baleron. If he thought it was a good idea, maybe she should consider it. "They were escorting two tankers somewhere." She frowned in thought. "If we could extrapolate their course, it should lead us to more of them. Or at least to something worthwhile. If not a base, then...then..." She waved her hand as if the motion would fill in something.

"Extrapolating a course is simple." Baleron smiled, the left side of his face crinkling unpleasantly. As usual, the evileness of his expression indicated the sincerity of his desire to help. "Alphard could program the bridge computer to tell you exactly where they were going, using the input from two of your Viper tracking tapes."

Diana nodded, a lock of bright red hair slipping forward unnoticed to hover dangerously near her glass. "Even if all we found was a Cylon base, at least we'd know where it is." Gally looked at

her in surprise; she'd been listening to the conversation all along, in spite of her byplay with Morgan. Diana flushed slightly and said, "Did that make sense? This stuff does creep up on you." She smiled a little at Gally.

"No, it's perfectly logical," Morgan defended her genially. "We need all the information we can get about the Cylons. And if we get lucky, we might find something really useful -- a source of tylium, maybe even a factory complex of some kind." He tilted back in his chair, bracing himself with a long leg against the table support. "It's definitely worth following up."

"Washpsh." Freya raised her head and beamed upon them, her eyes focussing randomly, her abundant hair seeming to float under its own power. "Fin' Washpsh." Gally stared in amazement at the hovering cloud, wondering if maybe it was a form of sentient life that had replaced Freya's real hair on some exploratory trip without anyone realising it.

"Ah," said Laia gently, only that mild tone suggesting her annoyance. "And if, by some chance, they do have a nice little nest of Wasps, how do we get our hands on them? Do we just ask nicely? Or..." She paused, the thought bringing a twist of laughter to her face that made her look girlish. "Perhaps they'll be having a raffle, giving them away as doorprizes."

Baleron shifted in his chair, preparing to consider the other side of the issue. "The real problem is keeping the Cylons from suspecting our presence. So far, we've been amazingly lucky, but if they should suspect that the GALACTICA isn't the only surviving Colonial battlestar..."

Since everyone in the room knew all this, Gally felt no embarrassment about interrupting. "All we need to do is knock out their communications first," she said enthusiastically, her words almost colliding in her eagerness to get them out. "Then we can bring the OSIRIS in and pound their defences into the ground." She looked at the Captains, waiting for their reaction.

"And just how," Laia inquired patiently, "do we knock their communications out?" She looked completely unimpressed by Gally's inspiration.

Gally rubbed the tip of her tongue against her upper lip. Laia had a way of pointing out little details that could be difficult to deal with. But Gally was sure there was a way; she had another flash of inspiration. "Well," she let out a breath, "what if we just stole some Cylon suits and dressed up a couple of people in them? Then they could walk right into the command centre and turn off the communications." She sat back and looked around at the properly amazed faces.

"Ah," said Laia as she set her glass down very carefully. Gally tried not to smile as she waited to hear the Captain's praise. "A couple of Cylon suits. What a clever idea. I wonder why I didn't think of that." Her voice was deadly calm, more devastating than if it had been openly mocking. Gally could see Diana struggling not to laugh, as Laia continued. "Someone just puts on those heavy metal suits, which weigh, oh, maybe three times a man's weight, and strolls into the command centre. Then they casually turn off communications. And stroll out again, I presume."

Gally felt a kind of stinging in her eyes, and heat in her cheeks that told her she was red-faced, but she put her chin up defiantly. "This is an exploration ship," she said flatly, trying to match Laia's superior tone. "There are devices to wear on heavy gravity worlds that let you support four or five times your own weight. And once you have the uniforms on, those machines don't have the imagination to suspect your actions."

"She's right." To Gally's surprise, Diana nodded decisively in support, sending her hair bobbing. "The exo-suits would support the weight. And the Cylons would never suspect us. They'd never expect us to try anything so..."

"Crazy?" Laia suggested, but she was grinning in amusement now that Diana supported the idea.

"Unusual," Diana said firmly. "This just might work." Her lips curved, and her eyes sparkled, lit with interior excitement that made them glisten as radiantly as the shaft of light glinting through her glass of M'dori. Gally noted again how much more seriously people took ideas when they came from someone as beautiful as the Captain.

Morgan was watching Diana with an adoring gaze; even Baleron reacted more positively now. "There are real possibilities in the idea, that's for sure. Perhaps I could convince the Commander to let me explore them further. Diana, I'm sure you and I together could convince..."

Morgan cut across Baleron's words coldly. "It would need to be a group effort." He gathered himself in the chair, his body tensing as he glared at Baleron. Gally started, then realised that Morgan had misread Baleron's words to imply some sort of personal interest on his part in Diana. That proud Warrior was stiffening, as if at a challenge.

Hastily, Gally said, "All of us should go."

Freya echoed happily, "Go!" and swung an arm outward, lurching forward as if leading a charge, sending the empty flask rocking perilously. Morgan's quick reflexes saved the flask, catching it by stretching one arm the width of the table in a graceful arc.

Diana stood up, leaning somewhat stiffly against the table. Gally wondered if, in spite of her reputation, she was feeling the effects of the M'dori. But she spoke clearly enough. "We have a good idea," she announced. "I think the Commander would be interested." She looked around at the group, as if for approval.

Gally was trying to keep Freya upright in her chair, but she could see Laia blinking, her antagonism seemingly washed away by the M'dori. Morgan was grinning, for reasons only Morgan knew. Baleron stood up, too, and looked directly at Diana. His face was lit with twisted enthusiasm, one eye glowing evilly, one eye still flat and false, the scar pulling his face into a grotesque mask. "I'll go with you to see the Commander," he volunteered, and Gally hoped he didn't see the flicker of distaste on Diana's face. After all, he couldn't help the way his face looked.

Instantly, Morgan was on his feet as well, easily towering over both Diana and Baleron. "Let's go right now!" His tone sounded challenging, though Gally couldn't imagine who he'd be directing a challenge toward.

There was an immediate crash as Freya's chair hit the floor, followed by Gally's a micron later, as she grabbed for the swaying Warrior. Laia looked up, and then resignedly pushed herself to her feet. "What can he do but throw us out?" she said, her mouth twisting sardonically. "The Cylons have already done the grounding."

* * * * *

"Tell me again, very slowly, just how we convinced the Commander that this frakin' plan made sense?" An all too sober Freya, her hair pulled so tightly back that it gave her face a stark severity, had trapped Gally in a corner of the small briefing room. Her dark eyes reflected more honest puzzlement than her belligerent tone suggested.

"It's not really a bad plan," Gally said defensively, trying to edge away. "Of course, some parts of it are...indefinite...but that's to be expected."

"Indefinite!" Freya snorted, closing her eyes briefly. "That's not what I'd call it. Insane, maybe. Ridiculous. Half-baked. Impossible. Ill-conceived. Unrealistic. Daggit-brained." She seemed capable of continuing indefinitely, but to Gally's relief, a dry voice broke through her tirade.

"There's no need for you to go along, if you feel that way." Baleron's ascetic form was a welcome sight to Gally, as he avoided scattered chairs, making his way across the room to the two women. "I'm sure someone else could be found to volunteer in your place."

Freya began to bristle, but then she was distracted. In the doorway, young Sergeant Arion struck a pose with arms akimbo, a wicked grin on his face. "Sure, Freya," he teased. "I know Alexandra's been dying of curiosity. She's game for any action."

Freya gave both men a level look, then shrugged. "Oh, I'll go," she said. "There should be at least one sane person along." Gally grinned to herself; Freya would never admit she liked adventure. Freya glared at Baleron, as if defying him to respond, and continued, "Someone with enough smarts to keep themselves in one piece."

Baleron stiffened, and seemed about to reply to the insult, but Gally broke in hastily. "Captain Diana's going along, don't forget. She's certainly sane." Diana's reputation for sane, cool behaviour under any circumstances was legend. Freya couldn't possibly suggest that Diana would be irresponsible, let alone insane.

Freya gave Gally an irritated look, but she moved away to drop into a nearby chair, straddling it. "I thought better of her judgment," she said tartly, hooking her scuffed boots into the rungs.

Arion broke his pose and crossed the room to slide onto another chair, reversing it so he faced Freya over the back, his arms crossed, a look of mild worry on his face. "You really think this expedition is a bad idea?"

Gally found herself holding her breath, waiting for Freya's reply. Freya answered slowly, her face more serious than usual, and her tone, for once, devoid of sarcasm. "I really think we are running out of ships and ammunition -- and desperate people will grasp at any chance, no matter how slim."

There was an uneasy quiet in the room for a moment. Gally was trying to inconspicuously slip out of the corner and take a seat closer to the door. Just as Arion began a reply to Freya, Gally's foot somehow snagged a chair behind her, and the chair went down with a resounding crash.

Both Arion and Baleron swung around, Arion knocking his own chair to the floor as he sprang into a defensive posture, his hands stiff before him, his body in a half-crouch.

"Gally, I swear your timing's so bad, it's suspicious," Freya drawled, still seated, although she'd straightened in her chair.

"What's going on here?" The immediately recognisable tones of an angry Captain Diana brought all four into stances roughly resembling military "attention." The Captain was poised in the doorway, sliding a laser back into its holster as she surveyed the scene.

Baleron elected himself spokesman. "A chair was knocked over," he explained evenly. "Just a little accident." His tone was almost icy, as if the question had been unreasonable.

Diana focussed her ire on the tall, battle-scarred Sergeant as she entered the room. "It sounded more as if you were throwing chairs in here." She pushed back a rebellious lock of red hair as she threw a penetrating look at each of them. "We don't need dissension at the start of what is going to be a dangerous mission. If any of you feel you can't work together..." She let her voice trail off, but her stare returned meaningfully to Baleron.

Behind the Captain, the doorway filled with the tall frame of Lieutenant Morgan, his face wearing an expression of faint amusement. Gally wondered what he had to be amused about, even as she tried to think of some way to take the unfair pressure off Baleron, who was staring blankly at some spot to the right of the irritated Captain, his scarred face devoid of any expression.

The tableau was broken as Morgan stepped aside for the entrance of Commander Christopher. Trim and fit, solidly filling out the traditional blue uniform, the man had a presence, carried a weight of authority that made him seem larger than the far taller man beside him. His glance flicked over each of them, summing up their attitudes and merits in an instant, but he made no comments. He strode to the small podium at the front of the room and checked the viewer dials, giving them moments to unobtrusively collect chairs and assemble in regulation formation. Diana stood in the front row, flanked by Lieutenants Morgan and Freya; the three Sergeants formed a stiff line in the rear.

"Sit," the Commander said economically, his brisk nod acknowledging their respectful line-up; they all sat.

"Our long-range scanners" -- the Commander pressed a switch, causing a hologram of a planet to form on the dull grey wall -- "have observed this world in detail while we hid in the aura of their sun. We've seen several fleets of tankers, guarded by a mix of Raiders and Wasps, land in this port." The planet expanded, the view centring on one particular continent, enlarging to one area which became recognisable as a spaceport, lined with square buildings that would be warehouses and service bays, marked with the scorched concrete common to all places where ships repeatedly launched. They could see rows of Wasps and Raiders, poised to take flight.

The hologram paused on one taller building, dominated by slender cones of sparkling white material that extruded unevenly from the roof. "This is clearly their main control centre. Note the profusion of high-density long distance transmitters, far more than a small, off-the-main-space-lanes planet warrants."

The holo resumed its journey, stopping again at a small building set back from the launch area and distinguished only by the extensive fenced area beyond it. The hologram jerked suddenly forward, to peer into the fenced area, where rows of blocky objects shrouded in grey covers bulked mysteriously; then it swung back to concentrate on a featureless door.

"What was that?" Sergeant Arion's insatiable curiosity won over his sense of military decorum. Gally was equally fascinated, although she'd seen these holos three times before; but, when Christopher fixed Arion with a tight glare, she was glad she hadn't been the one to interrupt.

The Commander continued with no change in inflection. "This small ceremony is repeated at regular intervals of a planetary day. You'll note there are exactly six Cylons in the incoming crew." The holo, still centred on the door, showed a group of six Cylons marching up. One towed an anti-grav sled, with something covered by another of the impenetrable grey sheets. The door opened, and two Cylons came out. The crew of six halted, facing the two from the building; ritual salutes were exchanged, metal arms glinting in the sunlight as the figures moved in perfect unison. The Cylon with the sled unhooked the tow from its waist, transferred it to one of the Cylons from the building, and stepped back into line. The arms flashed once more, and the six executed a simultaneous turn and

marched off in perfect formation, while the other two Cylons returned to the building with the sled, closing the door behind them.

"We traced the incoming crew into the mountains," the Commander explained as the holo blurred and resolved into a new view. They saw a rocky clearing with a cave mouth in a cliffside behind it. The holo closed to a tight focus on the sides of the cave mouth, so they could all see the smooth regularity produced by a laser beam. Then it pulled back, so they could watch the crew of six Cylons emerge from the entrance, the last Cylon leading the loaded sled. Gally wondered if this was the same set they'd seen earlier; but, of course, since all Cylons looked exactly alike, it was impossible to tell.

"We assume it's some kind of mining operation," said the Commander, as the holo showed the Cylons halting in the centre of the clearing. A new team of six Cylons marched into the clearing, their backs to the viewers. The last member of the group towed an empty sled. A longer ritual exchange was performed, then the new group marched ponderously into the dark entrance, while the original six moved steadily forward, through and out of the hologram's sight.

"We have no idea what they're mining, or why." The Commander pointedly directed his comment toward Arion. "We do know there are always six in each group; they take the same route through the forest back to the port; and after they turn over the sled, they enter what appears to be barracks." The hologram did a fast blur, then showed the six Cylons, sledless, marching into a long, low building. "They stay there for a day, and then a new crew emerges and marches out to the mining site with an empty sled."

Under her breath, Freya murmured, "For recharging their little batteries."

"You'll notice" -- the Commander made it sound like an order -- "that the control building is not far from the barracks. A crew of six could redirect their course and arrive at the control centre, allowing several centons before alarms would be raised by their non-appearance at an expected place. Once inside the control centre, any diversionary tactics would give one of you time to sabotage the communications gear. None of you should have any trouble recognising the appropriate relays."

The hologram dutifully switched to a scene of Cylons moving intently before a lighted board. "Since these are computer controlled, just as our equipment is, damage to the weakest links -- the sending and receiving terminals -- will effectively render the whole system inoperative." The holo zoomed to a close-up of a glowing green screen. "Damage these -- there should be two -- and then retreat to safety." The holo swung to the right, paused at an identical screen, then winked off.

"All of you have practiced with the exo-skeletons we've jury-rigged to enable you to wear the Cylon suits." The Commander paused as if for reassurance, and Gally found herself nodding in reply. "Lieutenant Morgan will wear the transmitter; once we hear the signal, the OSIRIS will leave the protection of the sun and make, at full speed, for the port area. Any ships that succeed in launching can be destroyed by our weaponry before they escape to warn the Cylon High Command. The OSIRIS should have no trouble knocking out the ground-based weapons as well. We've identified their power source; with that gone, the individual Cylons will cease to function in a short time, and we can safely take over the base, strip what we can use" -- he paused, and looked again at Arion -- "satisfy any lingering curiosity, and be on our way before the High Command sends troops to investigate the failure in communications."

"What about the tankers, sir?" Arion was undaunted. "What if one of them arrives while we're...in the middle of things?" Gally admired the ease with which the young Sergeant always came up with more questions, even if they were ones that had already occurred to the people planning the mission.

The Commander smiled grimly. "The Cylons adhere to schedule in all things, Sergeant. The tankers arrive quite regularly -- and since one has just left, we have an operational window before the next is due. That's why you're going down now."

He looked at each of them in turn, measuringly. "I realise that each of you except Sergeant Arion has been involved in planning this mission, and has probably seen all of these holograms before. I merely want to impress upon you, while there is still this last chance to reconsider, that this is a dangerous and extremely risky mission. You have all volunteered; I'm sure you're all aware that Captain Laia's replacement was at my order, not her request. The circumstances under which the idea for this mission was conceived were...less than sober, but it will be carried out in a completely sober manner. It would be understandable -- and would carry no...penalty -- if any of you wished to change your mind." He stood silently, watching them, waiting expectantly.

Gally glanced sideways at Freya, but that Warrior was sitting as impassively as Baleron, her eyes steady on the Commander. Gally looked back at the man and suddenly realised, "He wants us to back out! He's really worried about us!"

Impulsively, she said aloud, "I'm sure we'll all come back all right, Commander." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Freya cast a despairing glance at the ceiling, but the Commander only looked startled, and for a moment, a little older.

"Very well," Christopher said crisply. "Report to Alpha Shuttle Bay for launch in twenty centons."

* * * * *

Watching the stars flash by the shuttle viewports, Gally wished she could be up front to observe the manoeuvres Captain Diana was doing to make the shuttle imitate the gentle arc of a captured meteor heading in toward the planet. It was only reasonable that Lieutenant Morgan, a highly-skilled pilot in his own right and Diana's own wingman, should be in the co-pilot's seat. Still, it would have been interesting...

She sighed, and turned to observe the other three occupants of the shuttle's cabin. The shuttle was built to carry several times the current number of passengers, so each of them had room to lounge. Gally was curled against the port. Arion perched on the edge of the middle seat in one row, his back to the pilot's compartment, facing Baleron, who was doing his imitation of a stone Warrior, sitting absolutely still, with not even his real eye blinking. Freya was sprawled across three seats, watching the others with an amused smirk and only occasionally adding one of her sharp comments to the conversation.

"They must be mining something valuable," Arion insisted heatedly, irritated by Baleron's behaviour. "Gold or precious stones, maybe, or maybe something that can be used for fuel. They wouldn't go to all this trouble if it wasn't valuable. Look at the way they protect those tankers!" His brown eyes danced, and his face glowed as he talked, as if he could convince Baleron and Freya by the very force of his considerable enthusiasm. Gally thought privately that his arguments showed a great deal of logic, although she knew their superiors had been unimpressed.

His current audience was equally unmoved. Baleron, in a tone hinting of boredom, said, "We never conclusively established whether those tankers were taking something away or bringing something to the planet."

Freya threw in, "More likely, it's something only a Cylon could love -- like fancy tin to plate their dress helmets."

Arion, as usual, was undaunted. He continued to speculate volubly, equally ignoring both Baleron's cold logic and Freya's sarcastic outbursts. He wanted to investigate the Cylon mines. That the detour was unapproved, and that no one was in favour of making it, did not discourage him. The danger in their real mission had made no visible impression on him.

Gally listened contentedly. She was happy to be with friends, those few who affectionately tolerated her social blunders and valued her somewhat eccentric point of view. That they themselves were eccentric never occurred to her; raised among books and machines, away from "normal" people, Gally had no comfortable set of standards by which to judge others, so her evaluation was based more on how they responded to her than by society's measure -- when she even knew what that was.

Arion smoothed back a lock of brown hair, deliberately relaxing his shoulders and softening his voice. "Those exo-suit harnesses we're going to wear -- they're going to give us the strength to overpower the Cylons in the first place, and to wear those suits of armour after that, right?" He paused, appealing to his audience with wide eyes and spread hands.

Reluctantly, Baleron conceded, "That's the plan."

Arion pounced. "Then why couldn't one or two of us use the extra speed of the harnesses to check out the mines? We're going to be ambushing the Cylons on the trail; we can't be that far from the mines, and we should be able to run over and be back long before we're needed for the mission." He took a quick breath, then delivered his clincher with exaggerated emphasis. "We might learn something of critical importance to..."

Freya cut through his speech, her voice a merciless drawl. "At the least, you might get killed. Worse, you might warn the Cylons that we're around, and put us all in danger."

Arion flushed, and his eyes sparkled with sudden anger. Gally found herself suddenly remembering that this was a proven Warrior who'd endured Cylon tortures and made his share of kills in a Viper. Treating him like a touchy youth, even if he did look and act like one, could be dangerous.

Freya's eyes flashed daggers, her mouth twisted with contempt, but before any more angry words could be spoken, Baleron interposed, his dry tones depressing. "We're going to be ambushing the Cylons at the best strategic spot. With my knowledge of tactics, I assume that to be a location rather nearer

the base than the mine. The exact distance between the base and the mine wasn't mentioned at any briefing I attended, but if it takes a team of Cylons half a day to cover it, assuming they are marching at full speed, it would be approximately 115.3 kilometres between the base and the mine." His eyes gleamed, the real one with glee and the false one with energy, as he talked on, his face otherwise a bland mask, and his voice devoid of all inflection. "Assuming only three-quarters speed for the marching Cylons, the distance computes..."

Arion settled back in his seat, his anger and his enthusiasm equally deflated. Freya threw an appeal upward with her expressive eyes, grimaced, and settled back with a pained look on her face. Gally wondered whether the others truly didn't realise that Baleron was deliberately boring the confrontation out of existence. She listened, fascinated, as he managed to drone on and on.

Freya's patience was shortest. Somewhere between one-sixth and one-twelfth speed, she said rudely, "Shut up, Baleron. Nobody cares!" Then there was quiet in the shuttle until Captain Diana's voice came over the com, warning them to prepare for landing.

The landing was relatively gentle, considering the rough terrain they dropped into. Baleron went quickly to the storage area and began pulling out their gear. Gally helped him, as Arion and Freya took up defensive positions near the exit hatch, ready to spring out with drawn lasers if Fate put some enemy there.

Captain Diana strode briskly through the shuttle, Morgan following and almost appearing to stroll. Diana acknowledged the two Warriors' positions with an approving nod of her red curls, said tersely, "No detectable power surges in a 50-metre radius," and released the exit hatch with a decisive sweep of her hand.

The shuttle was tucked into a narrow cleft of rocky hills, out of sight of all electronic eyes. The only danger would be if the Cylons sent a party to investigate the "meteor." The OSIRIS crew intended to fulfill their mission well before that.

One by one, they took a pack from Gally and swung clear to find footing on the pebbled surface. As Baleron dropped down to join the rest, he activated the mechanism that closed the hatch, sealing the shuttle to any accidental prying.

"Phew!" Freya wrinkled her nose. "This place smells like an unchanged bast litter box!"

Baleron raised his head and sniffed as he snapped the last buckles of his exo-skeleton into place. "Actually, it smells like a pterox cage," he commented thoughtfully.

"A pterox? I've heard of them; aren't they extremely rare?" Arion talked as he shouldered the light pack of tools for dismantling Cylons. "Found only in one isolated spot on Canceria?"

"If they're so rare, how did you get to know them so well, Baleron? Or" -- Freya questioned in mock surprise -- "were you trying to make a joke?" Gally marvelled at the variety of ways Freya found to puncture the slightest suggestion of an inflated ego.

Her skill was wasted on Baleron. He replied soberly, "I had the misfortune to room for a short time with the owner of a pterox. It's true, they're extremely rare, and an unusually beautiful bird, but the sheer volume -- as well as the stench -- of their droppings keeps them from being popular."

"Hmmm." Diana frowned. "So, by the time we get back, the shuttle could smell like this, too."

"I imagine they'll get over their first fright at our landing and return soon." Baleron had begun eyeing the sky somewhat warily, and now the others began peering nervously upward.

"Maybe we can just wait 'till the OSIRIS knocks out the Cylons, and use one of their ships," Arion suggested, a hand held against his nose.

Diana shook her head, glanced over each of them, obviously checking their readiness, then raised an arm in a traditional "let's go" gesture. She led the way down the valley, and the rest fell into a disciplined line behind her, single file until the valley widened, then automatically spreading out to form a cross, Freya and Arion flanking to the right, Baleron and Morgan to the left, and Gally forming the rear point behind Diana.

Gally found it a weird sensation. They were quiet, alert, behaving as if this were a normal patrol. But, expending no more effort than that required for a casual stroll, they were bounding over metres at a step.

At the end of the valley, a rockfall blocked their passage. There was a plateau visible above. Diana gathered herself and hopped to a halfway point on a large boulder; another hop, and she was

standing atop the plateau. The others moved up and repeated her actions one by one, disappearing over the edge as they bounded on. Gally looked doubtfully at the boulder, which had shifted slightly under Morgan's weight, took a deep breath, clenched her teeth, and hopped. The boulder rocked, and she promptly fell to her hands and knees, unable to get enough purchase to jump again before it actually started rolling.

"Stay still!" she hissed at it.

Ignoring her, the boulder gave a determined lurch and rolled forward. Gally scuttled backwards with a crab-like motion, keeping herself on the rapidly shifting top for a few moments while she looked around wildly. Some native version of a tree, orange-barked but with discernable roots, was clinging hardily to the inhospitable cliff face. Abruptly, Gally pushed with the foot closest to flat against the rock, launching herself to the side in an ungraceful scramble. She embraced the hardy little tree with enthusiasm, pulling out half its root structure as she clung frantically to it.

"Gally?" Above her, a deep voice sounded concerned. She twisted around, parting the tree's meagre vegetation; Morgan was peering down over the edge of the cliff.

Beside him, another form appeared, the fuzzy halo of hair identifying her before she spoke. "Gally! What the frak are you doing down there? You look ridiculous!"

"Perhaps," Morgan said thoughtfully, "we should have brought some rope."

Freya shook her head and called down, "Gally, stop hanging around, and get up here!"

Having had a few moments to study the situation, Gally took a deep breath and started yanking herself up the cliff, moving from handhold to handhold. With the power assist of the exo-skeleton, it was a little like swimming; she felt the pull of gravity against her, but each outcropping she grasped served to thrust her farther, even when they crumbled as she used them. In a few centons, she was standing somewhat unsteadily beside Freya and Morgan, breathing only a little harder than if she'd run a few kilometres.

At once, they bounded ahead to where the others waited, all resuming their positions in the defensive sweep. They continued on for several centars, over rock weatherbeaten to a boring flatness, until Diana signalled a halt. The plateau stretched levelly for kilometres to each side; but immediately before them, it dropped abruptly into another narrow valley. The valley was crowded with assorted orangey flora, a lush stand of trees, and an enthusiastic tangle of weeds, all supported by an anemic little creek trickling through the centre.

"There's the path." Diana nodded toward the valley, took two paces forward, looked straight down over the edge, and stepped over it into nothingness.

As she watched Morgan's bright head disappear from view, Gally gulped and whispered to Freya, "Do you see any path?"

Freya gave her a reassuring slap on the shoulder. "It's not as bad as it looks, Gally," she said with a grin. "You'll get used to these things in time."

Gally attempted a withering smile, but Freya only grinned wider. Baleron followed Arion over the edge, then Freya moved into position. Gally took another deep breath -- she'd given her lungs more exercise this morning than they'd had in sectars! -- and stepped forward. Bracing herself, she peered nervously over the edge, leaning out just enough to see clearly.

About a third of the way down the face of the cliff was a ledge; Freya crouched on it, and below her on a lower ledge, Baleron balanced gracefully. Even as Gally watched, he stepped out into the last drop, Freya jumping to take his place.

"It must be easy," Gally said firmly to herself. "Any Warrior with normal coordination can handle it." She looked down again, noticing that the now-empty first ledge was actually rather narrow and ran only a few metres in either direction. If she missed it, there was a seriously long drop -- and none of those nice little orange-barked trees grew on this cliff.

"Ohhh." Gally let out her breath and closed her eyes briefly. It was such a long way down... If she hesitated any longer, they'd all be waiting for her again. "They all made it safely," she reminded herself in a voice that, even to her, sounded scared. She opened her eyes, straightened, and stepped off, stiff with anticipation.

The jolt of hitting the first ledge, even cushioned by the exo-skeleton, caused her knees to fold, dumping her with a rude slap into a sitting position.

"Frak!" Gally pulled herself up and took the next step, before she had time to think about it. Her next landing was more of a stagger, but she avoided an outright collapse. Only one more to go, and this one would put her on solid ground...

This time, she concentrated on landing correctly, and managed to absorb the impact so she could walk evenly up to join the waiting Freya.

"Nice landing, Gally," Freya commented mildly. "Now, if you can just keep from sitting down for a few centars..."

Gally felt her cheeks growing hot, but she pressed her lips firmly together and fell into line behind Freya. They worked their way through the underbrush and came out on a well-defined trail, where the vegetation had been worn back to uniform grey rock.

Diana paced along the trail, her head flung back so red curls tumbled down her back as she gazed up into the leafy branches partially overhanging the trail. As Gally stepped out onto the trail, Diana turned and raised an inquiring eyebrow toward Morgan.

The tall man nodded thoughtfully, and Diana motioned the rest of the group to close around her. "We'll count off," she said, pointing to Morgan, who obligingly said, "One." Gally was five; she hoped that didn't mean she'd miss all the action.

"When they come down this path, they're marching in single file," Diana said quietly but clearly. "We're going to be in the trees overhead; when I signal, you jump the Cylon in the position you called off."

Using hand signs, Diana assigned each of them to specific trees. Having watched Baleron jump easily onto a branch, Gally imitated his movements and found herself with a faceful of leaves, standing in the crotch of a gently swaying tree. She gingerly beat back the orangery and twisted around until she could see the trail, the other occupied trees, and especially the flash of red hair that located her Captain.

After a while, Gally began to notice that this miniature forest supported insects as well as leaves. After a longer while, she noticed that the insects were not discouraged by the alien taste of her blood. Since she clutched in one hand the electromagnetic disc that was a guaranteed Cylon stunner, and since the other hand clung to the tree trunk, scratching was out of the question. Besides, Warriors weren't supposed to itch, anyway, Gally reminded herself. She shifted restlessly, trying to achieve the stoic frame of mind of a proper Colonial Warrior, and to ignore as well a small cramp in her leg.

Stoicism was a futile and overrated philosophy, Gally decided. She attempted to ease her itches by rubbing up against the bark. The part of her anatomy that had absorbed the impact of that first fall began to actively hurt. Her stomach emitted a small growl, setting her to thinking wistfully about lunch; she hastily gobbled down a nutrient stick, terrified lest the Cylons come while she was eating.

The Cylons obligingly didn't come. And didn't come. Gally began to wonder if perhaps, just this once, the flawless Captain had made a mistake. Maybe that was a game trail below them; maybe the Cylons had already come and gone for the day; maybe they'd be stuck in these trees for the rest of the day, and a night, and another day. Gally closed her eyes and prayed.

Fortunately, the Cylons made small metallic thumps as they marched along the trail. With her eyes closed, Gally had evidently missed Diana's signal; when the meaning of those odd little thumps penetrated, she opened her eyes to see the others attacking. One lone Cylon, presumably Number Five, was trying to aim its weapon at a madly rolling mixture of Cylons and humans.

Gally promptly jumped into action, striking with both feet at the Cylon's midsection, which sent it tumbling backwards. Gally hit the bare rock of the trail only centimetres from the fallen Cylon, landing squarely on her already tender seat.

Bravely ignoring the pain, she slapped the electromagnetic gizmo on the Cylon's chest, then twisted around, using the recumbent Cylon for a prop, so she was on her knees. She peered hopefully into the dark helmet, noting with satisfaction that the normally pendular red light was now fixed. Even as she watched, the glow lessened and reluctantly went out.

Gally glanced around. To her right, Baleron efficiently pried open his downed Cylon's armour. To her left, Arion, having already bent back the chest plate, was energetically yanking out components and tossing them into the underbrush. Beyond, she could see the others busily tearing and stripping their victims.

Gally got out her own Cylon-opener and began applying it to the metal seams. With a high-pitched ripping sound, the Cylon armour began to part, and in a short time Gally was adding her share to the electronic litter alongside the trail.

Once they'd cleared sufficient room inside, each of them was to fit themselves into the armour. Gally used another of Major Jason's nifty gadgets -- a sonic welder -- to re-seal Baleron's seams, then passed him the tool so he could return the favour.

The rectangular view-slit narrowed the world around her to those things directly in front of her. She began to realise they might have more advantages than they thought; the Cylon view of things was literally limited. She saw a shuffling line of "Cylons" forming. There were three in front of her; where were the others?

She swivelled on one foot -- it was easier to turn the whole body than to move just the head -- and leaned forward so she had a view of the ground as she turned. The side of the trail was decorated with small piles of bright red, yellow, and blue connectors and chips; the interior of the Cylons was as colourful as the outside was drab.

Three-quarters of the way into her turn, she saw Arion, not yet in armour, bending over the covered sled. He'd stripped the cover back and was poking at the neatly cut grey bars piled on the surface. She saw him rub his tiny moustache, a sure sign his raging curiosity was unpeased. He shrugged, replaced the cover, and turned to his Cylon suit, where Freya stood waiting to seal him in.

Gally was sure it was Freya, even though all the suits were identical, because this Cylon had one arm at an acute angle to its body, and was ominously tapping its right foot.

As soon as Arion was sealed up, they formed a straight line along the trail, facing the side. One Cylon stepped smartly out, gave them a quick review, and then started a brisk march down the trail. Each of them followed, Gally bringing up the rear and marvelling that the Captain could make even the clumsy Cylon armour reflect her crisp air of command.

Gally'd actually taken several paces when she remembered the sled. In sudden horror, she swung around, jolted clumsily back, and sent the heavy metal suit bending perilously forward. The long arm stretched out, the stiff fingers closed around the tow rope, and she had it. She straightened slowly, relieved that there were no audible creaks, swung herself back in the opposite direction -- nearly unbalancing herself when the sled jerked after her -- and plunged down the trail after the disappearing line of fellow pseudo-Cylons.

(To be continued.)



TIME PASSAGE

• Honore de Bruey



"Time Passage"

(By Honore Bryte)

For once, a long stint in the celestial observation chamber brought no great sense of peace or satisfaction to Captain Apollo. The sad disquiet remained, perhaps intensified by the distant gleam of the cosmos. Sensitive fingers glided over controls in the ancient dome, covering the transparent panels with stronger, radiation-protective metal, then taking a last run over the lower communication bands, on the off chance there might be a signal. The channels were silent. The stars were blotted out by the cover. Apollo sighed, for some unknown reason dissatisfied by the past few centars. He had no reason to stay, but felt no desire to leave.

The clanging hatchway behind him, and the sudden noise of the engines beneath the dome, drew his attention. He turned his head to see a woman climb into the dome, drop the hatch, and pull off her protective headgear. She smiled at him, waiting for the echoing remnants of the engine sounds to fade away before speaking.

"Hi, Apollo. I thought I'd find you here." Sheba glanced upward. "Tired of the stars? I never thought I'd see the day!"

He smiled. "No, I'll never tire of them. It's just that, after a few centars here, a man needs to look at something else."

"Will I do?"

"Sure," he replied with a laugh. "What minor irritation are you bringing to my attention today?"

Her hand barely touched his as she flipped a switch to uncover the dome again. The metal panels withdrew, showing the stars, very little changed from a few centons before.

"They're so beautiful," she murmured, not answering his question.

The light touch disturbed Apollo. He let his hand drop to his side. Sheba glanced at him before resuming her study of the visible heavens.

He cocked his head, watching her profile quizzically. After a moment, her attention drifted back to him. She smiled, then leaned against the control panel.

"I just got back from patrol, so I thought I'd drop by and see if you were up to anything, or felt like being up to anything." She shrugged. "I feel like a third wheel with Cassie and Starbuck. They obviously have better things on their minds."

"I know the feeling," he commented wryly. "I've known Starbuck a long time, and there've been plenty of times I've suddenly found urgent business elsewhere."

"Like coming here alone?"

He nodded, eyes turned starward. After a few more moments of silence, Sheba moved behind him.

"Don't you get a stiff neck this way?" Before he could reply, her fingers were stroking his neck, massaging gently, then more firmly.

"Umm, that does feel good," he said with a touch of astonishment. "I didn't realise I was getting sore muscles."

"You won't have them for long."

"Not if you keep that up. But you still haven't said what you want to do." He leaned back to smile up at her. She blinked hastily. Apollo realised with amazement that she was hiding tears, and his sense of uneasiness returned. He caught her hands. "What's wrong?" he asked in concern, still gazing up at her.

"I was just thinking, about a lot of things, some things I hadn't remembered in a long time, and I didn't feel like being alone any more."

"Your father?"

"Today would've been his birthday. I'd forgotten how much I miss him. It's been so long since..."

"And you feel disloyal for it? Forgetting, I mean? And not being there with him, on the PEGASUS?"

"That, too. It's his birthday. We had some wonderful times on birthdays, and we always did special things for his. He'd come home, and Mother and Father and I would go places together. When Mother died, we'd still get together, go to our favourite places, take long walks, and he'd tell me how he was keeping a place for me on his ship. And he did. And then there was Cassiopeia..."

She glanced down at Apollo, not really seeing him, following the memories.

He finished her thought. "And you feel a little guilty because it could've been three of you again, and you didn't want it to be?"

She nodded, looking out at the stars. "Just when I was glad to see him happy again, we both lost him," she said simply.

"He may still be alive somewhere out there." Apollo released her hand to gesture toward the dome's clear walls. "You know your father. He isn't easy to kill."

Sheba sighed. "Who knows?"

Her hands still rested on his shoulders; Apollo felt vaguely uncomfortable. "Sheba?"

"Yes?" she whispered.

"It's more than just your father bothering you today, isn't it? Care to talk about it?"

She seemed uncertain, and walked quietly around the chair, facing away from him. Apollo stepped down at her side, continuing to study her face and its passing emotions.

"Time," she said softly. "The way time's passing. What we're doing with it, where we're going. A lot of things, all tied up with time, and my father."

"What does your father have to do with time?"

"I'm not really sure. I can't help but feel time slipping away, taking my life with it. Somehow, it's like Father. I looked away, just once, and I wasn't a little girl any more, I was a Warrior. Then I looked away again, and everything's gone. Everything. Mother, Molukai, the Colonies, the PEGASUS, Father. It's all gone, and I'm lost and alone."

"You're not lost, not while the Fleet survives."

She shrugged.

"We've done our best to make you welcome. My father's pleased to have you here; he treats you like a daughter. What more can we do?"

She looked up at him, and Apollo saw tormented unhappiness in her eyes, and unshed tears. Distressed, he took her face in his hands. "Is it me? Is it something I've done?"

She pulled away, laughing softly, sadly, almost bitterly. "No, no, it's not that, not you. Working with you has never been a problem. It's more personal than that."

"What is it? Can you talk to me about it?"

"I tried talking to Cassie. She said I should talk to you."

He waited expectantly, not quite sure what he expected to hear. Sheba turned to him, took a deep breath, then threw her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth to hers, lips molding together in a long kiss.

After a muffled murmur of shock and a moment's indecision, Apollo pulled away. Sheba let her hands free at his insistent tug, then turned away, grabbing her headgear with one hand and reaching for the hatchway door with the other.

With a muttered expletive, Apollo grabbed her arm and pulled her back. They stared at each other

silently for long centons, her blue eyes pleading, guilty, tearful, his green eyes demanding an explanation.

"So that's it," he finally said. "I should've expected it. I've seen it coming long enough."

"Then why didn't you do something, say something?" she cried.

"What should I say? What should I do? I don't love you, Sheba."

She pulled free as if struck. "I know that! I've always known that! I'm not asking for your love, if you can't give it."

"Sheba," he said softly, pulling her close again, "we're friends. I hoped that would be enough, for now, at least."

"And because we're friends, we can never be anything more to each other? Starbuck and Cassie..." She looked like she could suddenly have swallowed her tongue. "They may never seal, they may never mean anything more to each other than they do now, but she loves him, and their relationship..."

"And you want that with me? I'm not Starbuck, Sheba. I can't just..."

"What do I have to do? Get down on my knees and beg you to touch me, care for me, want me?" She followed her words with action, dropping to her knees before him. "Apollo, I love you. Let me know what it means to know your love, feel your touch in the night, be the one you turn to. Please..."

Cursing again, Apollo threw himself to his knees beside her and clamped a hand over her mouth. "No!" he said abruptly, as she stared mutely at him. "Cain's daughter should never have to beg for anything!"

"Not even from Adama's son?" she asked softly when he lowered his hand.

"Not even from him." Apollo leaned back against the base of the control panel, still on his knees. "So that's what it comes to, in the end. Cain's daughter and Adama's son, not two people who'd really just like to stay alive and be left alone in peace."

Sheba's voice was equally soft. "It'd be better if we were like Cassie and Starbuck, free to take what comes, what life gives. We'd be free then to do and be what we want."

"Instead, we remain our fathers' children, duty-bound as Warriors, honour-bound not to betray our families and our pasts. I don't know if it would make a difference if we were other than what we are. Even Starbuck and Cassiopeia are bound by responsibilities..."

"Apollo, I get so lonely sometimes," Sheba whispered, leaning against his shoulder. "I don't know who to turn to..."

"So you've come to me. Why? Just for me? Or is it because I'm Adama's son, Flight Commander, the one your father would expect for you? How do I know?"

"I don't even know! How can I tell you? We're the perfect match, you know. Maybe we'll never know what we might feel for each other in different circumstances."

Somberly, Apollo watched the stars. He said nothing.

"Why can't we try? Why can't we see if we can find something in each other beyond our heritage?" she asked desperately, trying to kiss him again.

"That's not the answer," he protested. "We may both hate ourselves..."

"At least, we'll know!"

"We still have to work together! We can't do that if we're ashamed to look at each other, or hate each other because of one night."

"And maybe it won't make any difference in anything, maybe we'll still be the same. Apollo, please, I love you. I want a chance to show you, to prove it to you. Maybe we can both learn from it. We don't have to be lovers, if you won't have me that way, but at least..."

He caught her hands, but had to blink tears from his own eyes before he could look at her. "I'm not sure," he whispered, trying not to look into her eyes, begging him not to say "no."

"I am." She let one hand stroke his arm, curl around his neck, her fingers playing lightly through his hair.

"I have to think..."

Sheba rested her cheek on his shoulder, watching Apollo as he gazed at the stars.

Apollo thought back to the few days he'd had with Serina at his side. He'd learned to live again without her, but now, with Sheba so vulnerable in his arms, he wondered if he remembered how to love. Or if he dared...

"Apollo?" Sheba kissed him gently, with none of the passionate loneliness of before.



He looked down at her, his eyes still filled with an image of the stars. "Time," he murmured distantly. "Slipping away from both of us, leaving us nowhere and nothing. A Flight Commander with no command over himself, a daughter with no father to stand by. For all we are, what do we really have?"

Sheba couldn't stand the lost look in his eyes. She turned away. Could she share that with him?

"Shared duty, separate griefs, no time or place for love any more. All gone, slipped away, and I don't know if I have it in me to reclaim them. Help me, Sheba, before I forget what it was like..."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't want to hurt you like this, to open old wounds. I was...am...so lonely..."

"So am I. I wonder if there's time..." Apollo still seemed lost somewhere within himself.

"I'll try, Apollo, and I won't push it, if you don't want my love, or me."

He hugged her, sighing, then finally finding a smile. "We'll see, Sheba, we'll see."

They watched the stars in trembling silence, strained smiles hiding what they couldn't say -- what they might never be able to say -- to each other.

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Thorn

(or: What's Luke Skywalker doing in a Battlestar: Galactica story?)

Sharon Monroe



"Thorn"

(By Sharon Monroe)

"Good thing I'm due on patrol," Alexandra said in disgust, staring at Freya's winning hand. "I've been losing all night!"

"Who are you covering for this time?" somebody asked.

"Myself!" she retorted.

"For a change," laughed Corbin. It was a running joke that Alexandra, with her knack for creating trouble, spent more time covering her squadmates' patrols than her own.

"Who's dealing?" Freya asked.

The card game continued as Alexandra skipped out of the ready room and headed for the launch bay. She was in a good mood, despite the losing cards.

In the launch bay, she hopped easily into her Viper and looked over to her wingman. Lieutenant Gregory gave her a thumbs-up signal and sealed his cockpit. She rapidly did the same.

"Viper craft cleared for launching," came Shandar's voice next to her ear. She touched her control stick, and fell back against her seat as the Viper hurtled down the launch tube. Then she was beside Gregory in dark space ahead of the OSIRIS. Alexandra didn't realise she was humming a distracted tune.

"You're in a good mood today," Gregory commented cheerfully.

"Shouldn't I be?"

"I understand you just lost a long string of pyramid."

"Don't remind me!"

Gregory laughed. Their usual round of chatter did little more than amuse Shandar as he monitored them from the bridge, but it put them both in the proper frame of mind. Then Lieutenant Gregory and Flight Sergeant Alexandra could get down to business.

"Anything on your scanner?"

"Negative, Lieutenant."

"Quit calling me names!"

It was over a centar before anything interesting presented itself.

"Hmmm," Gregory's voice cut in. "Dibs on that star system dead ahead. Looks like it could have usable planets."

"Lead the way, sir."

"I'm gonna get you for that!"

They skimmed easily through the system. "Standard yellow star, five planets, two within our range of habitation... Life form readings from the second one, but the third planet appears to be locked in a rather severe ice age." Gregory kept up a running monologue from his scanner. Alexandra busily transmitted that information to the OSIRIS.

Gregory ended his rambling with a definite instruction to his wingmate. "Let's investigate that inner planet."

"Going down," Alexandra replied.

The two Vipers dropped quickly into atmosphere and were soon flying over a mildly fertile world with

a wide variety of animal forms, none of them large. Their landing was uneventful.

Alexandra took life readings on the animal species, while Gregory began his favourite occupation -- digging up plants for both the official Bio-labs and his own personal conservatory.

"Hey, look at that!" Alexandra called to him.

"What is it?" the young man replied, looking up.

"Oh, it's gone now. But I thought I saw a dragon."

"Huh? You sure? A dragon?"

"A little one, flying, like the Captain's dragon does. But I think it was orange."

"An orange dragon? If it's anything like Draco, keep it out of my quarters!" He returned to his grubbing.

Gregory grew some rather exotic herbs in his quarters. Draco, Captain Diana's little violet dragon, kept discovering new ways to get at those herbs for lunch. Fortunately, Gregory liked animals almost as well as plants, or Gregory would've given the little dragon the boot. Gregory also respected Draco's fire-breathing ability.

In a short while, they were ready to leave the planet. There was really very little of interest to bring them back. No large mineral or tylium deposits, no lush food crops, no large meat-type animals or exotic creatures for the labs. The OSIRIS probably wouldn't bother with a survey party.

Back aboard the battlestar, Gregory hurried off to the Bio-labs. Alexandra headed back to the ready room for a last hand or two of pyramid before retiring. She met Hyperion and Doria, both heading on duty, and stopped to say hello.

"Alexandra, what's that on your boot?" Doria asked.

Alexandra looked down. Something brown-and-tan coloured encircled her ankle. As she watched, it began to move. "I don't know..." she began.

"Hyperion, let's get her to the lab!"

"But..."

Between the tall Engineer and his petite but stubborn wife, Alex was whisked off to the zoo.

"So what is it?" she asked a centar later when Radagast and Doria finished a cursory examination of the snake-like beast.

"Looks like a snake, but the internal structure has some peculiar variations," said Radagast, frowning slightly.

"Doesn't appear to be dangerous," Doria contributed. "No venom pits. Too small to be dangerous as a constrictor, at least on our size scale."

Alexandra was plainly forgotten. She shrugged and headed for the door.

"Have fun with it!" she called back. They were so engrossed in preparing a new series of tests for the creature, they didn't notice her departure.

The young technician assisting Radagast and Doria watched Alexandra leave, and caught her last remark. He began to grin widely. He would certainly have fun with it!

* * * * *

Lucas made a stop at the zoo when no one else was around. Radagast had transferred the snake-creature to a "natural habitat" enclosure, and that was his goal.

His next stop was Alexandra's quarters. With a handy override code for the lock, he was able to slip in and out with no problem. A peculiar grin illuminating his face, the young man stationed himself down the hall, waiting for the excitement.

It was a somewhat annoyed Alexandra who returned to her quarters only centons later. Continued wisecracks about her new business of snake-smuggling had gotten to her after that long patrol. In total disgust, she'd abandoned the pilots' lounge, despite the fact that she was winning for a

change. All she wanted was a good night's sleep.

Several centons after a definitive click ended her day and locked her door, a shriek resounded from the Warrior's quarters, followed closely by a noticeably feminine form in a blue nightgown springing through the door and rebounding from the far wall.

This was what Lucas had waited for. Playing knight-errant, he dashed down the hall to her aid. "Alexandra! What's wrong?"

She gave him a dirty look, deduced from his angelic smile that he was responsible, and prepared a tirade.

The thought then occurred to her that she was in plain sight in a very public corridor in a nearly-transparent nightgown, facing a smirking young man with a warped sense of humour. Several muttered curses were all Lucas heard as she vanished behind the door he could have opened if he'd wanted to.

Baleron and Corbin happened to have observed, but not heard, the incident. They weren't sure what to make of it, though Lucas's silly grin when he saw them, and the way he took off down the corridor, gave them some ideas.

"Well, what'a'ya think about that?" Corbin guffawed.

Baleron's attempt to hold a straight face failed.

Safe behind a locked door once more, Alexandra studied the small snake coiled on her pillow.

"Creature," she muttered, "I'm getting your stripes for this!" Illogical, as the creature had no stripes.

The snake was returned to the zoo. But it didn't seem to want to stay there. Over the next few days, it found itself in Alexandra's quarters three times, until the woman made it standard procedure to thoroughly check her bunk before retiring.

What was more difficult to deal with was the scuttlebutt concerning a Purple Squadron pilot and a certain blond Biotech. Alexandra didn't know who to suspect first. She decided to try Lucas.

"All right, Lucas, what's the idea?" she asked, sliding into the chair opposite him at breakfast. They were alone in a corner of the hall, which didn't help the rumour mill.

"About what?" he grinned.

She glared.

He grinned wider. "I understand there's a snake who's developed an affinity for you," he remarked casually.

"Lucas, if that thing shows up in my quarters one more time, there won't be room in this galaxy for the both of us."

"Tsk, tsk. Don't know what you're talking about."

"Everybody else does. It's no longer funny. I'll admit it's ingenious, but if you quit now, we're even. Cease and desist with the snake before I decide I owe you. Then, you'll see trouble!"

Lucas merely smiled. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asked, changing the subject.

Alexandra struggled to control her temper. Staring at the grinning youth who was so contentedly enjoying her anger, she finally forced herself to smile. "All right, kid, go fetch some ambrosia."

"And later?"

"Go!"

"Right!"

A truce was arranged, and peace declared.

The peace was broken two days later when Alexandra stalked into Lucas's quarters (despite the lock), absolute fury on her features.

"I won't waste time. That thing's in my quarters again."

Lucas stared, not even rising from his bunk, where he'd been enjoying a very pleasant dream. He shook the sleep and hair from his dazed blue eyes, staring up into her furious brown ones. "Huh?"

"I said," she shouted, very close to his ear, "the snake is in my room again. I've begun to wonder who the biggest snake is on this ship!"

"What? I didn't put it there." He was beginning to make sense of the world.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know. Will ya let a guy get some sleep?"

"The way I've been sleeping lately, I don't care if you get your beauty rest or not!"

"Get out of my quarters! Haven't we got enough people talking about us?"

"Because of your stupid stunt!"

"This isn't helping." He struggled to sit up. "If I swear I had nothing to do with it, this time, will you believe me? And leave?"

It was his barely-awake exasperation that finally convinced her. "So who left the present on my pillow?"

"I said I don't know, and I don't. Good night!"

Lucas determinedly rolled over and pulled the blanket over his head. Alexandra had no choice but to leave.

Questioning brought no answers. No one would admit to knowing anything about the snake in her quarters. Alexandra was beginning to feel paranoid. Who was providing transport for the snake? She gave up trying to return it to the zoo; it simply returned to her quarters, almost faster than she did. After a section, she was used to its presence.

Then one day, returning from a patrol, Alexandra got the distinct impression something was wrong with her little roommate. "Snake, what's wrong with you?"

The creature was lying very still, coiled on her bunk, and for a micron she thought it was dead. Then the tongue flicked out once, listlessly. Closer examination showed the brilliant tan diamond pattern on its back had faded to almost colourlessness. Without looking further, Alexandra gathered the tiny snake into her hand. It didn't even try to coil around her wrist, but merely lay on her palm, tail swinging loose.

Alexandra took off for the zoo. Somebody there ought to know what to do for a sick snake!

The zoo was in a state best described as chaos. One of the young dire wolves -- Flicka, naturally -- had escaped her habitat and was attempting to romp out of the room. Doria was trying to control the rapidly growing pup; Flicka obviously thought she was playing. The sight of the very petite Doria trying to convince the large Flicka to heel was hilarious.

"This may not be the best time to ask, Doria, but I need a favour," Alexandra began.

"Sure, if you help me with this monster first. Easy, Flicka! Why can't you be more obedient?"

Alexandra settled the snake out of the way, then lent a hand in trying to corral the dire wolf. After a few more techs joined the battle -- and after Flicka used up some of her energy and tired of the game -- the large animal meekly returned to her habitat.

All this time, the snake was losing more of its colour, and the impression of unease worked its way farther into Alexandra's consciousness. Finally returning to her pet, she found it tightly coiled into an almost white ball. Her instinctive reaction was to lift the snake to see if it was still alive.

The snake's instinctive reaction was to bite -- deeply -- into her palm.

"Ouch!"

She vaguely heard Doria call to her. "Hey, Alex, are you all right? You're getting pale..."

That was all she remembered.

* * * * *

There was a sensation of falling, dropping through a golden haze of nothingness. She finally stopped, hitting something soft and comfortable. A warm, sweet wind blew over her from somewhere she couldn't see. Curving golden walls stretched away from her, into infinity.

"It is a nice place you have for a home. I am glad you live. The venom is our greatest protection during the change, but I did not intend..."

Alexandra felt confused. Where was she? Whose voice was running through her mind?

"You may call me what you please. I will know when it is you."

Huh?

"I like it here. This will be a very nice home..."

"Who in Hades is talking? Where are you? Where am I, for that matter? I don't see anybody..."

Faceted, rusty-coloured eyes burned into her mind. A golden-orange creature took form from the surrounding goldness. A long slender body, until it suddenly shook itself, and nearly transparent sunbeam wings spread from the body, expanding to encircle her...

Oh, Lords, that's too big for a battlestar...

"I seem larger than I am. Your mind is in mine. I must apologise for that. We have not dealt with your kind before. I like you. I did not intend..."

I'm hearing things...

Laughter filtered through the linkage. "That is true!" Then, "You will see me soon. I must thank you for bringing me with you. I will see so much more than on my world..."

I don't understand...

"You will know me when you see me."

The golden fog enveloped her again. She thought she heard a voice in the fog, the touch of a familiar thought.

* * * * *

Alexandra blinked once, feeling herself waking from a long, interesting sleep. She sat up, feeling quite rested. "Hey, where am I?"

Dr. Senbi regarded her with some astonishment. "Do you feel all right? You're in Life Centre."

"I can see that. Why? Where...?" She tried to get out of bed.

"Stay right where you are, young lady! Ten centons ago, you were dying of a poison we couldn't even begin to analyse. Your life readings were so low we had to look twice. Now, you want to jump out of bed and go as if nothing happened. Not until you've been thoroughly examined!"

"But I feel fine!"

"I'll be the judge of that. Phoebe, take care of the lady. Make sure she stays in bed."

"But..." Senbi strode away with a determined gait. "Phoebe, what happened?"

The young med tech settled at her bedside. "We got a call from a tech at the zoo, screaming you were dead. You were talking to Doria, and you just keeled over. Lucky they brought you right here. Senbi thought first maybe that snake bit you, but it seems to be in a dormant stage, so they're keeping it under observation at the zoo. You almost died!"

"But I feel fine!" Alexandra responded impatiently.

Phoebe looked skeptical. "Well, you'll be here for a few days, anyway, so you may as well accept it."

Alexandra watched as the med tech flounced away. Then she stuck her tongue out, and buried her face in the pillow.

* * * * *

Two days later, Alexandra was released from Life Centre. Lucas, the Biosurvey tech who'd caused her so much trouble, was there to see her home, much to her chagrin.

"Really, Lucas, I'm quite all right. Senbi said so," she told him, trying to get rid of the man before taking a nap. She did feel a little tired.

"Now, Alexandra, you don't want to be alone if you have a relapse, do you?" How could such a devious person look so innocent?

Alexandra had a feeling she was being watched. As Lucas rambled on, trying to be witty, she scanned the room...

...And suddenly laughed out loud. Appearing above Lucas's head was a brilliant orange-and-gold flying creature, with a long, thin, remarkably snake-like body. Her mirth echoed playfully back to her.

Lucas smiled in satisfaction. "See? You really do need me."

"Lucas, get out."

"What?"

"Get out."

She finally got him out of her quarters..

"Well, well," she said, strolling back to her bunk. "You are here. But what are you?"

The snake, no more than six inches long, fluttered in front of her face. It gave her no response.

"How'd you get in here, then?"

"Flew in with Lucas. He could not see me."

"Couldn't see you?"

"You need not talk aloud to communicate with me."

"I'm more comfortable this way. What do you mean, couldn't see you?"

Wicked laughter was the only response.

"All right, how come I can see you?"

"Your body knows my chemistry. The venom does that. You will always see me."

"Hmmm."

"I like it."

"Like what?"

"The name. Tell Lucas..."

Alexandra grinned.

* * * * *

Alexandra strolled casually into the lounge. Lucas deserved this. She wandered over to his table.
"Hi, Lucas."

An orange flash appeared momentarily on her wrist. Lucas choked on his ale.

"I think you know Thorn. I named him after you. Thorn, as in my side. Like him?"

Lucas was still sputtering. The orange creature vanished from his sight. No one else had noticed the exchange. Alexandra wandered over to the nearest pyramid game.

"Who's dealing?" Corbin asked as she sat down.

"I am," Freya said. "Hi, Alex. Good to see you back again. Pass the cards."

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GUARDIAN ANGELS

DORIS FISHBEIN



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"Guardian Angels"

(By Doris Fishbein)

Adama watched Apollo sleep in the life pod. His son had nearly died in the throes of whatever ritual he'd been attempting alone in his quarters. Now that his survival was assured, Adama's reactions were mixed.

First of all, the only place Apollo could have obtained those secrets was from his own collection of books and papers. Those writings were private and secret. It angered the Commander that he had to fear his own son stealing from him like a thief.

With that stolen information, Apollo had, completely untrained and ignorant of what he was doing, attempted a seance. Alone and unanchored in whatever maelstrom he'd thrown himself, Apollo had lost himself, almost forever. All he would say about the lost time was that he'd found Diana, and she was still alive. If it wasn't just a figment of his dreams, Adama was glad of the knowledge, but it wasn't worth Apollo's life.

He had to remember, too, that his son was Flight Commander. He had behaved rashly and idiotically. A Flight Commander should be setting examples of good behaviour, not showing how to die uselessly.

And what was to prevent Apollo from trying it again? That bothered Adama perhaps more than anything. What if he tried something else, something more dangerous? How could he keep Apollo safe from dangers he didn't know the depths of himself? And what if Apollo was fool enough to discuss the matter with the wrong people? There were still a lot of people who misunderstood the psychic sciences, who were superstitious enough to fear men and women who could use the skills. It took so much ability and discipline to control one's own mind, and most humans seemed incapable of what was necessary.

Adama remembered an old man who'd once taught him. Maybe the old man still lived, somewhere in the Fleet. Maybe he would agree to teach Apollo. Apollo had the ability -- that was obvious -- but he lacked the training.

But if his son wasn't interested? He would still take orders. The Commander was not going to endure another Cylon alert with a panicky sergeant reporting the Flight Commander was dead and trying to burn out the ship. Not under any circumstances.

He stopped by the bridge long enough to check the personnel files. Then he gave Tigh the helm, and caught the next shuttle to the Libran liner SUNSTORM.

* * * * *

In a small room aboard the SUNSTORM, two people delved through a stack of papers and manuscripts that would have astounded Adama. In the night of terror when the Cylons attacked, the old man and the young girl had somehow salvaged their precious research and source materials. The very young woman looked up first.

"Uncle Ovid, someone's looking for you."

The old man "looked" at her intently. "What does he want?"

"A favour, in the name of old friendship."

"We have few friends left. Go, Krysia, and bring him here, but carefully."

She nodded, then vanished.

Ovid sighed as he put away the ancient text he'd been studying. The girl, young as she was, far outstripped his meagre abilities. He'd been a teacher and founder of the mind experiments on both Caprica and Gemon. Neither had lasted long. Too few people understood what he was trying to do, and viewed him with suspicion. Since the Destruction, even those who knew him felt he should have been able to do something about it. They didn't realise he was only one old man.

The blind man settled himself on a comfortable cushion to wait for his visitor.

* * * * *

"Where might I find a man named Ovid?" Commander Adama asked. He could see the young crewman was surprised, but very eager to please.

"That strange old guy? He's got a niche in the old baggage hold, him and his niece. They live alone. Shall I show you the way, sir?"

"Not necessary, Minos. I'll take the Commander to my uncle."

Adama gazed at the slim and fragile-looking girl. Her features were pleasant, soft, and her hair was long, almost to her waist, of a rich auburn colour.

"Who are you, child?" he asked kindly. The sergeant smiled at her, then stalked off when she ignored him.

"My name is Krysia, sir, and I'm twenty yahrens old, hardly a child."

"You look too young to be Ovid's niece."

"He's my father's uncle. Ovid's raised me since I was five."

Adama saw the slender woman glancing quickly and quietly about them as they turned a corner. Suddenly she stopped and grabbed his arm.

"I know what my uncle's told me about you, Adama. This won't disturb you like it might some people."

With those words Adama found himself in a small room lined with books and tapes, and an old man settled in the centre on a large round cushion. Adama was, to say the least, astounded. But he quickly recovered as he recognised his old teacher.

"You've learned a lot, Ovid."

The man nodded. Adama noticed the peculiar discolouration of his eyes as he took a place on a cushion near Ovid.

"You're blind." It was a statement. Ovid nodded.

"Yes, Adama. A legacy of the Destruction. What do you think of my girl's abilities?"

"She's...quite talented. I didn't know teleportation was possible for more than one person."

"Her mother and father were both students of mine. She inherited their abilities, and all the training I could give her. What is it you wished to see me about?"

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. It's been a long time."

Ovid shrugged. "You carry a heavy burden, many responsibilities. I didn't expect ever to see you again. Perhaps it would have been better. But you came for a purpose. What is it?"

Adama glanced at Krysia. Her head was buried in an ancient tome, but he knew she was absorbing everything the men said.

"Can we speak alone?"

"Krysia, close yourself off. Perhaps you'd better go to the next room."

Somewhat reluctantly, she obeyed, leaving swiftly. Ovid looked back to Adama. "What has Apollo done?"

"Is it so obvious?"

"You forget how well I know you. You were one of my finest pupils and friends, though you didn't have the full range that Krysia has."

"It started several sectars ago. Apollo had a precognitive vision. He thought he was going insane, and hid it until he couldn't any longer. The vision saved us from a Cylon ambush. He has skill, obviously, and a very valuable talent, if it isn't wild. But he's afraid of it."

"Then, just a secton ago, he...stole some information from my quarters, on certain rituals dealing with the dead. He tried to contact his wife's spirit. He didn't have any idea what he was getting into. He nearly died."

"I suppose I should have come to you right at first, but Apollo seemed content. Now, I'm afraid of what he might do next. Lords know what's running through his mind. I don't want him to kill himself, or do harm to anyone else accidentally. Ovid, you taught me so much during those experiments. What I need now is a teacher for my son, someone to show him how to use these abilities, how not to be afraid to them. He needs to be trained and tested, as I was. Can you do it?"

Ovid shifted, empty eyes still fixed on Adama's face. "I can't, Adama. I'm an old man. I've seen my best days; my skill is on the wane. People here are afraid of me, superstitious, and they leave me alone for the most part. If I tried to train your son, they'd know what I was doing, and they'd set him apart. They wouldn't like it. Apollo couldn't take the separation such training would require. He's Flight Commander; he wouldn't give that up to sit at my feet. Any teacher you seek for him will have to stand at his side, teaching him in his own time, as he learns to accept it. You know your son better than I, Adama. Isn't it true?"

Adama had to nod. Apollo might be unwilling to accept such training, might be angry at an intrusion into his mind.

"But perhaps there is another way," Ovid continued. "Krysia. She's of an age to join the Warriors. If she were at his side, she could teach him. She's the best pupil I've ever had, and she could do far more for him than I could."

"Don't you have any other pupils to teach Apollo? The girl may be good, but she reminds me of Serina. I know Apollo will see the resemblance. He wouldn't let her get close to him; he'd be too afraid of the pain that might occur."

"She's the best I have."

"Perhaps when he understood the purpose, but not right away... Isn't there anyone else who can open the door?"

"Adama, when our planets fell, I was in the midst of an experiment, testing psychic abilities. The night the Cylons attacked, we were at the University. With the first wave, we joined in an attempt to organise a counter-attack, or at least a defence. The Cylons swept through us like nothing. Most of my people died in the first centar. I lost my sight."

"But that wasn't the worst. When it was all over, and so many of us were dead, the rest tried to gather again, knowing we had to get off-planet or die. Do you know what some of the other survivors did? They'd seen some of our efforts. Because we failed, they accused us of not trying, or selling out to the Cylons. Human mobs completed what the Cylons began. Those who survived, still trying to salvage the human worth of our people, were killed by the animals the others had become. Some of us were hurt, couldn't even fight back. We split up, not knowing what else to do." Tears ran from the dead eyes at the awful memories. "We saw people beaten to death. Some were lynched; a few were left for the Cylons to find. Krysia and I survived, managing to stay together and save my life's work. I don't know if any of the others survived. We haven't seen any of them since."

Adama was silent for a moment. "Some of the cruelest deeds of war are committed by people afraid of differences, afraid of dying, afraid of losing their minds and bodies. They need to defeat something, even if it's their own kind. I know what you mean, Ovid, I saw it myself. After the Cylons, ourselves, animals in human form, trying to survive. Krysia is all you have left?"

"All but my research. If there's any legacy I can leave my people, it will have to be information they may some day be able to use, and brave enough to wield without fear. If you believe Apollo has the abilities, and is worth teaching, Krysia will try to reach him. Will he accept her?"

Adama remembered the long days wondering if Apollo would live or die. He wouldn't go through it again, not for these reasons. His face hardened. "He will have to."

* * * * *

Apollo was not in a good mood. On top of everything he'd been through in the past sector, there was another batch of green cadets to tend to. He didn't need it, not now. There were too many other things on his mind.

Serina, Sheba, Diana. The names ran like a litany.

Serina, his wife, Boxey's mother, a Warrior. Dead now for just over a yahren, she was still in his thoughts. He couldn't forget her, not that he wanted to. He wanted to remember the love they'd shared, but it always led to the guilt that hit him every time he remembered her death.

Sheba, another Warrior, always at his side. What he felt for her was friendship, and all she could

claim from it, but not the kind of love he knew she was seeking from him. Was it guilt over Serina that made him so afraid to feel for her? Was he denying himself?

Diana. Little sister, precious lover. He'd grown up with her, and love had grown up between them. He hadn't realised how closely he was still tied to her, after all the yahrens apart. Or was it just that he was clinging to her to avoid feeling and fearing for someone else? She was alive; she loved him, and he loved her. If they ever found each other again, what kind of relationship could they have? Could love truly survive so long apart?

He shook his head, trying to concentrate on simulator runs he was preparing for the new cadets. He didn't see the Commander standing next to him, watching.

"Ready for the run?" Adama asked quietly.

Apollo looked up quickly, smiled, and nodded. "Something simple. It's their first try, and some of these kids are pretty young."

"So were you, once."

"I had a lot better training at the Academy than we're able to give them in the Fleet."

"True, unfortunately." The Commander was silent again, as Apollo coded in the last commands. Several nervous giggles and murmurs of conversation drifted through the door. "Take care of them, Apollo. We need them."

Apollo nodded gravely, then beckoned the cadets into the room. Adama slipped out, nodding a greeting to one of the young women.

Krysia was in the second group that would take the run. While other cadets were desperately trying to remember what they'd been taught about Vipers, Krysia spent her time memorising the Captain's features and emanations. Without actually trespassing in his mind, she absorbed his gestures and emotions. He was a strong man, but not difficult to read, for one with her training. She caught the unsettling feeling that he wouldn't accept her, or what she had to offer. She'd have to try. The Commander seemed to feel it might some day be a matter of life and death for the young man.

"Second run! C'mon, cadets, look lively!" Apollo ordered.

The second group of cadets did indeed look lively as they climbed into the Viper simulators -- not to mention nervous and fidgety. The first group settled back wearily, unhappy with themselves. Several had managed to shoot down their companions, one had misread his scanners completely and attacked an asteroid, and the Cylons had completed the task; there were no "survivors." Apollo desperately hoped this second group would have a little more skill or luck, or he was going to send them all back to the classroom.

He didn't find a lot to be cheerful about from this group, either. They did, however, last longer than the first group, "killed" more Cylons -- and one cadet actually survived to the end of the run. He was impressed, considering the earlier performance.

"Well, cadets," he finally said after they'd all resumed their seats for the briefing, "I think you can see it takes a lot more than mere knowledge of what a Viper is to fly one. You'll be back here tomorrow. In the meantime, you'd better review some basic principles of flying. Dismissed."

As the dispirited group trudged toward the door, Apollo caught the arm of the one pilot who'd survived the run. "Cadet Krysia?"

"Yes, sir?" The short, slender woman looked up at him questioningly.

"You did well in there. Ever have any flight experience before this?"

"No, I just pick up on things quickly."

"Are you planning on keeping that helmet on forever?"

"Sorry, sir. I didn't realise we were being tested on removing our helmets." She pulled it off with a smile.

Apollo stared, slightly stunned, a small grin frozen in place. "Uh, no, we don't test you on removing your helmet. Keep up the good work."

She saw the shock and knew what caused it. Still smiling, she nodded and dashed out the door, then

stopped. It was easy to detect Apollo's thoughts in the swirling patterns around her.

Captain Apollo slumped against the nearest simulator. "Lords!" he thought, "she could Serina's sister! How can I stand to see her every day?"



He walked back to the computer console and began coding in the next day's assignments. "Will it do any good to think of her as Serina's sister? Or will it be better to leave her a complete stranger? I don't know... As long as she isn't assigned to Blue Squadron, I'll be fine. Lords..."

His fingers slipped. The simulators protested being told to self-destruct. He shook his head roughly, trying to shake her out of his mind. It didn't do much good. He started again.

Still standing outside the door, it was obvious to Krysia how shaken the Captain was. His thoughts intruded violently into her mind, almost overriding her ability to block him out. Didn't he realise he was broadcasting so strongly almost any sensitive could read him? No, he probably didn't. She almost ran down the hall, needing desperately to find a quiet, private place.

In the sectors that followed, as the new group of cadets completed their simulator trials and began their first solo flights, Apollo found it no easier to endure Krysia's presence. Not only did she remind him of Serina, but she always seemed to be paying him very close, almost intense, attention.

It was the same when he had to deal with her personally. Finally, feeling backed into a corner, he tried ignoring her completely.

It seemed to help. She sensed his outward attempt to ignore her wasn't helping much. Since he couldn't keep her out of his mind, she started staying out of his way.

Starbuck never seemed to notice the resemblance between Serina and Krysia. He chided Apollo for ignoring the best cadet in the class and tried to draw her out himself, but his attempts were met with smiling rebuffs. This only piqued his curiosity. Krysia decided Starbuck was a complication she didn't have time for, and refused to get involved with the free-wheeling Warrior.

He might also be a complication Apollo didn't want. Or was she imagining Apollo kept an eye on her whenever Starbuck tried to make a move?

Between Starbuck's charming smiles and Apollo's aloof awareness, Krysia walked a quiet path. She had too many memories from Libra to permit herself to open freely to other people; it was too painful. She helped her uncle, honed her talents, and learned to be a Colonial Warrior.

Sheba was perhaps the one who suffered most during those sectons. Apollo wouldn't talk to her about the "incident" or what was bothering him. He didn't talk to Starbuck, either. Sheba's attempts to draw him out of his shell had no effect. Apollo always seemed to be a million miles away. Then Sheba saw Krysia, saw the resemblance Starbuck missed. With a pang in her heart, she tried to step aside, and threw herself into combat with everything she had.

* * * * *

For a full centon, Apollo stared at the roster before him. Until now, assigning the new cadets had been easy. Of course, he could view them objectively, the students of the last few sectars, soon to be Warriors in the squadrons. The one he'd put off until last was Krysia. The secretive, smiling young woman looked so much like his dead wife... Did he want her in Blue Squadron? Not really. But could he force himself to assign her somewhere else?

There would be no advantage to having her there to remind him of Serina every time he saw her. He had the uneasy feeling he would make excuses for her if necessary, and possibly take risks to protect her. Remembering the surge of anger he felt the times he saw Starbuck ask her to accompany him to the RISING STAR, he felt uncomfortable. He was the only one who knew how close he'd come to taking a swing at his closest friend. No, having Krysia around would only hurt his objectivity and determination as Flight Commander. With a bit of regret, he assigned her to Red Squadron.

It was a relief when his father entered the room. At least, he could stop thinking about the haunting girl, and the loving wife he'd lost.

Adama smiled when he saw what Apollo was doing. "It looks like I'm just in time," he said.

"Time for what?" Apollo asked. The roster and assignment list still lay in front of him.

"To talk to you about your assignments for the latest group of cadets," was the Commander's response.

Apollo felt an unexpected stirring of uneasiness. His eyebrows lifted quizzically.

"I realise this may not be any of my business, but there's a cadet I'm rather interested in."

Apollo stared. His father interested in a cadet? In what way?

"She's the only surviving relative of an old friend, and he asked that I put in a little request for her assignment. It's just a little thing, but he said it would mean a lot to him. He's an old man, and..."

"Well, it would be irregular, but switching one cadet wouldn't be any trouble. Who is she, and where does he want her?" After the incident his father hadn't ever reminded him of, Apollo was rather eager to satisfy one little favour.

"He said he'd be grateful if she was in your squadron, so he'd be confident she was in a good command. Apparently, she's one of the younger cadets. Her name is Krysia."

Apollo froze. "Krysia?"

"Yes. Auburn hair, not very tall, rather quiet, from what Ovid tells me."

"I...know her. He...wants her in...Blue Squadron?"

"For now, at least. We were close friends when we were young, and Ovid tells me he would feel she was safe under my son's command. He worries a great deal about his niece being a Warrior."

"Well, it's rather irregular..."

"I can understand if she's already assigned somewhere else, but it means a lot to Ovid, and I'd appreciate it, too. I'm not sure I've had the opportunity to meet her, but she sounds like a very nice girl."

"Yes, she is..."

"Of course, you're the man in charge of the squadrons. If you don't feel she belongs in Blue Squadron, that's your responsibility."

How could he refuse his father, even if Adama weren't the commander of the battlestar? He was cornered. "I'll look after her, make sure she's okay."

"Thank you, son. I appreciate it, and I know her uncle will feel much better for it."

After some other small talk, the Commander left.

Very deliberately, Apollo keyed in the code to switch Cadet Krysia from Red Squadron to Blue. He sat back in his chair for a few moments, then quietly picked up the nearest throwable object and hurled it at the wall. With one muttered curse, he got up and stalked out of the room. For better or for worse, Krysia was in Blue Squadron, under his command.

Starbuck's reaction to hearing the news was to welcome Krysia to the Blues, and to invite her to the pilots' lounge for a drink.

Somehow, Apollo kept his clenched fist at his side.

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Apollo sat by himself in a corner of the lounge, moodily contemplating an untouched drink. He considered the last few sectors. What in Hades was happening to him? The last few alerts, he hadn't been able to hit the broad side of a base star. His reflexes were off. He was preoccupied. Apollo knew Starbuck and Boomer were covering for him, and he also knew he'd be dead now if they hadn't been looking out for him. There'd been too many close calls.

Starbuck put him through a test run on the simulator, to try and discover what was wrong; he checked out perfectly, as precise and skilled as he'd always been. But the micron he got in a real Viper, he flew like the greenest cadet.

Should he resign his commission? Ask for a leave of absence? Apollo couldn't justify to himself his staying on as Flight Commander when he was performing on such a below-par level. He had no right to expect his people to protect his hide when their own lives were so often on the line.

The sudden shrilling of an alarm interrupted his thoughts. Red alert!

Apollo wondered briefly whether he should even answer the alert, but he ran with the rest of the pilots.

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The battle was fierce, more so than usual, and Apollo knew he wasn't flying well. He was careless, reckless; he had to prove he was still a competent pilot.

So, although he cursed when he found himself cut off from his squadron, it was no surprise. And when the four Cylon ships closed on him in a formation that presaged a pinwheel, he cursed even more.

There was no one there to help him. He figured he was dead. His Viper rolled under a direct hit.

Apollo had to run. The Raiders pursued, closing fast.

(To be continued.)

STARTING OVER

Joy Harrison and David Morgan



"Starting Over"

(By Joy Harrison and David Morgan)

"Commander, you simply cannot continue to keep a good pilot off the active duty list without some valid reason. We need every decent pilot we've got."

Commander Christopher stared out the viewport at the distant stars, wishing his second-in-command would at least wait until after breakfast before bringing minor administrative matters to his attention. It wasn't as if this were an emergency. But, as usual, Arsenaux was right. "I know, Colonel, I know," he sighed. "I'm just a little reluctant to entrust a Viper to a man who may still harbour some unconscious wish to destroy himself. Granted, we need all our pilots -- but we also need ships for them to fly. We've no way to replace either."

Arsenaux frowned. It was true Captain Apollo had been badly hurt and...mentally unbalanced...when he first came aboard the OSIRIS, but the medical staff now pronounced him fit for duty. The Colonel was prompt to point this out. "Look, sir, the man's a damn good Viper pilot, and your own medical staff reports he's fully recovered. There's no longer any danger he'll try to harm himself or..."

"I know that, too, Colonel. I've read the reports."

"Then let him fly!"

"We can't afford to risk a Viper, let alone a skilled pilot."

Concealing his annoyance and frustration, the Executive Officer persisted. "Then what about letting him fly with someone else? He's no use whatsoever like this."

"Wouldn't he find that something of an insult? We'd be saying we don't trust him alone."

"Isn't that exactly what you are saying?"

Christopher didn't answer.

"Look, sir, you've a request from the civilian survey leaders to explore an old star system in Beta Quadrant. Our long-range scans indicate only extremely primitive life forms on one planet, and Bio-survey wants to know why the evolutionary process is so late in starting. We'll be in shuttle range of the system for about ten days, and the mission will need two competent pilots."

"Apollo and Captain Diana?"

"Why not, sir? With Apollo as pilot, and Diana as co-pilot/navigator..."

"I could give you a lot of reasons why not, Colonel," Christopher replied, "but I'm sure you have arguments to counter them all. And since Apollo would never willingly endanger Diana..." He sighed in resignation. "Very well, post the mission."

Arsenaux showed no sign of the relief he felt as he left the Commander's quarters. Christopher was a skilled diplomat, a perfect choice to command a research mission where half the crew was civilian -- damn touchy scientists! -- but purely as a Warrior...

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The shuttle skimmed the outer fringes of the target planet's atmosphere. The scanners showed nothing of major interest, and Apollo decided on a second orbit to find a landing site. He went in lower the second time. Another scanner check revealed primitive organisms in the water and soil, but nothing much larger than a microbe; the techs would have to dig for any information they gathered.

Apollo chose a landing site near a large body of open water and turned the shuttle in a wide arc, heading back to set down by the lake.

Suddenly, a tremendous explosion shook the shuttle. A female tech screamed in terror as a piece of heavy equipment tore loose from its mounting, smashing through the seats and pinning one man against the bulkhead. Air pressure dropped abruptly, and everything not secured flew through the passenger

compartment as if caught in a gale.

Apollo fought the controls of the wildly tumbling spacecraft, and Diana leaned across the instrument panel, adding her efforts to his as they struggled to bring the ship under some measure of control, to slow their speed enough for a reasonably safe landing. But the shuttle's stabilisation system was completely destroyed, her engines badly damaged. Despite her pilots' efforts, the small space-craft tumbled from the sky and struck the ground -- hard.

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Apollo didn't know how long he was unconscious. When he opened his eyes, it was dark. He heard faint moans all around him, and whimpers of fear from some of the techs. He unfastened his safety harness and struggled from his seat, his first concern the safety of Diana and their passengers.

"Diana?" There was no answer. "Diana!" Apollo's voice was sharp with fear as he climbed from the debris surrounding him, wincing as pain stabbed through his left shoulder and arm. He ignored it and stood motionless for a moment, peering through the darkness.

Diana was slumped across the instrument panel, her eyes closed, her face a pale blur. Desperately, Apollo shoved wreckage aside, heedless of everything but the unconscious woman. His frantic fingers sought for a pulse, then found it. It was weak, irregular -- but she was alive.

Ignoring his own pain, Apollo carefully lifted Diana from her seat and staggered toward the hatch, feeling his way slowly across the slightly canted deck. He couldn't see the crash damage, but he could smell enough to tell him the fuel cells were leaking badly. If they exploded...

The ground was uneven, rocky, barren. Apollo stumbled across the rough terrain until he judged he was far enough for safety in the event of another explosion. Then he placed Diana on the ground in the shelter of some large rocks and went back to the wrecked ship. He had to get the other survivors out.

Two of the techs were dead. But the other eight, although hurt, would be all right if...

"The fuel cells are ruptured," Apollo told them as he went forward to try the com. "Those of you who can walk, get the others out of the shuttle as quickly as possible. Be careful, there's a lot of loose debris. And get as far away from the wreck as you can."

The urgency in his voice commanded instant obedience. The survivors headed for the hatch, tripping over debris in their haste. Even in their fear, two of the techs lingered over precious instruments.

"OSIRIS, this is Research Shuttle Alpha. Do you read me? Come in, OSIRIS."

There was no response; the communications equipment was dead. There was no way anyone aboard the battlestar would suspect anything was wrong until the shuttle was overdue.

With a muttered curse, Apollo turned to salvage some of the equipment and supplies. They'd need food, water, shelter, and, above all, medical supplies. Those first, he judged, gathering what he could and leaving the shuttle. With luck, he might have time for five or six trips.

He was nearly back to the shuttle for a second load when he literally fell over a body. One of the techs had collapsed only a few yards from the hatch; unnoticed, he lay whimpering on the ground, unable to walk unaided. Around him, other techs rushed about wildly, trying to rescue their equipment. Apollo helped the man to his feet and half-carried him toward safety.

They hadn't gone far when a second explosion ripped the shuttle apart, sending fragments of metal and synthetics flying through the air like shrapnel. Even as the force of the blast threw Apollo from his feet, a heavy piece of metal struck the back of his head. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

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When he opened his eyes the second time, he couldn't remember what had happened. Something heavy lay across his legs; when he pushed it aside, he realised it was the body of the man he'd been trying to help. The tech was dead, and his body, falling on top of Apollo, had protected the Warrior from most of the flying debris.

The shuttle was burning, the flames casting an eerie red glow over what at first glance looked like a battlefield. There were bodies -- and pieces of bodies -- everywhere. Apollo forced himself to his knees, closed his eyes until the ground stopped spinning, then got to his feet. He moved too

fast, though, and the spinning started again, worse than before. With a groan, he sank back to his knees, his head in his hands.

It was several centons before Apollo tried to move again. This time, he was more careful, and the thought of Diana kept him on his feet. He couldn't help her, or anybody else, by sitting on the ground and doing nothing. He stumbled among the bodies, searching for any sign of life, but the techs were all dead, killed in the explosion. He returned to the spot where he'd left Diana.

She hadn't moved. Sheltered by the rocks, she was untouched by the effects of the second explosion. But she was still unconscious, and the fitful light from the fire revealed her face and uniform covered with blood. She was still breathing, though, and there was a faint pulse in her throat.

Apollo left her only long enough to find the scattered supplies he'd brought from the shuttle. He had bandages and some drugs, but he needed water; he knew Diana would die without it. He never considered the possibility that he would die, too.

With effort, Apollo forced himself to concentrate on the centons immediately before the crash. They'd been circling around to land by a small lake, and he was sure the shuttle went down fairly close to the landing site. That meant they were close to water.

He used a blanket from among the salvaged gear to make a crude pack for the things he needed most, then carefully lifted Diana and started off in the direction he thought led to the lake.

After what seemed an eternity of stumbling through near-total darkness, Apollo collapsed against a small boulder, too exhausted to go any farther. The darkness and the broken, rock-strewn terrain made travel hazardous, and he was afraid of falling and injuring Diana further. But he had to get her to the lake. Somehow, he knew it was important.

For several centons, Apollo heard nothing but the sound of his own harsh breathing, then something caught his attention. He held his breath, straining to listen, and heard a faint splash. A waterfall? The lake? No matter. It was water, and it couldn't be too far. That was his only coherent thought as he staggered to his feet again.

Only a few moments later, he tripped over a rock, throwing himself to one side and backward to keep from falling on Diana. He almost landed in the lake. Nearly sobbing in relief, he splashed icy water on his face, then, pausing briefly to catch his breath, began to rinse some of the blood from Diana's face and hair. He never noticed the gradual lightening of the sky until he suddenly realised he could see what he was doing.

The reddish light of the ancient star revealed something of the extent of Diana's injuries. Her right arm was broken, but that in itself wasn't serious, just a matter of a few centons in the OSIRIS Life Centre. She had a number of bad bruises and cuts; as he stripped away her uniform, Apollo found several of them still bleeding slightly. No major blood vessels were severed, but she'd lost a lot of blood and was in deep shock. The most serious injury was probably a bad concussion, unless there was internal damage his small scanner couldn't detect. But then, it wasn't working properly, kept flickering and giving erratic readings, so he couldn't be sure.

Apollo carefully set the broken bone, then began to wash and bandage the cuts, swearing softly as he worked. The scanner wasn't the only thing not working properly. He kept seeing two of everything, and his vision was fuzzy, blurred. He vaguely remembered being hit on the head by flying debris; maybe that explained it. A little sleep, and he'd be all right.

But Diana came first. He dumped his meagre supplies onto the ground, wrapped her in the blanket, and rolled his jacket into a pillow for her. Then he turned his attention to his own wounds, splashing icy water over the deep cuts. The shock of the cold made him gasp, and for a moment, everything seemed to spin again. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths; as the dizziness passed, he clumsily taped a bandage over the gash along his arm.

Desperately tired, Apollo nevertheless forced himself back to his feet and began gathering small rocks. He carried them to the water's edge, where he fashioned a makeshift bowl, lining it with a piece of his torn pressure suit. He used another piece of the suit to carry water to the bowl, then dropped a purification tablet into it. He was literally reeling with exhaustion, and his body was shaking in reaction to the abuse it had received; almost before the tablet began to dissolve in the water, he sprawled face down on the ground at Diana's side, sound asleep.

* * * * *

At first, he didn't know where he was, how he'd gotten there, or even who he was. A vague memory nagged at him, persisting even when he rolled over to escape the harsh light. Then pain shot through him. His left shoulder and arm seemed on fire, and his head throbbed as if a Cylon were

beating on his skull.

A Cylon? Fully awake, Apollo opened his eyes. The pain didn't leave, but memory began to return. The explosion, the crash, a second explosion, Diana...

"Apollo?" The voice that called his name was so faint he could barely hear it.

Moving slowly and very carefully, Apollo sat up, turning toward Diana and shading his eyes from the light of the red star. He was trembling, sick from the pain, and his vision was still blurred, but it didn't seem as bad as before.

Then he tried to stand up, and the ground suddenly tilted crazily beneath him. He collapsed to his knees, steadyng himself with one hand on the ground until the dizziness receded once more. He shivered uncontrollably.

"You're hurt!" There were tears in Diana's eyes. She tried to sit up, to help him, but was too weak. "Oh, Apollo..."

He crawled to her side. "Shh. It's all right. Just shock, mostly."

"But..."

He shook his head, placing his fingers lightly over her lips. "Don't talk," he said softly. "There was a crash. You..."

"How bad?"

"The shuttle exploded, everything's destroyed. The others are all dead."

"And...me? How badly...am I hurt?" Diana's voice was weaker; it was hard for her to talk.

Apollo shook his head again and took her hand, holding it tightly. "I don't know. I... The scanner doesn't work..."



"Am I...dying?"

"No!"

"Apollo...please... Be...realistic. If..."

"No! You won't die, I won't let you."

"...stubborn..." Diana sighed, and her eyes closed. "But I...love you..." Then she was asleep.

Apollo sat beside her for a long time, holding her hand. He'd never felt so helpless before. He couldn't think clearly, couldn't stop shaking. If she died...

No! He wouldn't let her die. Whatever it took...

Gradually, as he sat there, his mind began to function again. The landscape around him was as bleak and lifeless as he remembered from the night before. But they had medical supplies, weapons, water, and enough purification tablets to last for sections. Unfortunately, the lake wouldn't supply any food.

He began shivering again, cold in spite of what he knew to be a mild climate. His torn uniform provided no protection. He knew he was suffering from shock and wondered if he had a fever, guessed he probably did, and decided there wasn't much he could do about it. Wearily, he rested his aching head against his knees and closed his eyes. The situation looked grim. But with luck -- admittedly, a lot of it -- they could survive until the OSIRIS decided they were overdue and sent someone looking for them. If the weather didn't change, if Diana didn't grow any weaker, if his own fever didn't worsen, if...

Apollo sighed. There were too many if's, and he was so tired...

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Morgan slammed a sheaf of papers onto his desk, angrily shoving aside the rest of the data reports. He simply couldn't think clearly. Something was wrong...

Restless, he left his lab and aimlessly prowled the corridors of the OSIRIS, trying to concentrate. Then his pace increased as he suddenly visualised two faces he knew almost as well as his own. He would have teleported to the launch bay, but the corridors were too crowded; he couldn't risk it.

Morgan vaulted into the first launch-ready ship he reached; he didn't care whose Viper it was. Too preoccupied to even think of contacting the bridge, he was out of the launch tube and following the course taken by the research shuttle before anyone realised he was gone.

"Commander!"

"Yes, Andromeda?" Christopher turned toward the communications officer.

"A Viper just launched without clearance, sir. The pilot hasn't been identified yet, and doesn't acknowledge our transmissions."

"Put me through to that Viper!" he snapped.

Andromeda's hands flew over her console. "You have a channel, Commander."

"This is Commander Christopher. Whoever is flying that Viper, you are ordered back to the OSIRIS immediately." His voice crackled with anger.

"I'm sorry, Commander," Morgan replied calmly. "I can't do that. Something's wrong, and they need my help."

"Morgan! What...?" Knowing something of Morgan's talents, and his affection for Captain Diana, Christopher didn't have to ask who needed help, or where. Nor did he have to ask how Morgan knew about it. The telepath simply knew. The Commander might be furious about the man's methods and his lack of military discipline, but he knew Morgan well enough to realise the situation must be critical. "All right, Lieutenant. Can we help? Will you need any assistance?"

"I'll have to contact you when I get there, sir. I don't know what's going on, only that something's wrong."

"Very well, Lieutenant. We'll have a support team and shuttle standing by, awaiting your report. Proceed, and be careful."

Morgan's Viper streaked through space at maximum speed, but it still took several centars for him to reach his destination. As soon as he was in range for narrow-beam transmission, he tried contacting the shuttle. There was no response. Alarmed, he reached out telepathically and found -- nothing.

A quick orbital scan pinpointed the wreckage of the shuttle and the carnage surrounding it. The scan also revealed two life forms near a lake a few miles from the crash site. Morgan set his Viper down as close to them as he safely could. The life readings were extremely weak.

Diana had been well cared for, given the primitive conditions and evident lack of medical supplies, but she was in shock and had lost a great deal of blood. An ugly bruise on one temple warned of possible concussion. Morgan injected an analgesic and stimulants, but he knew they'd only help for a short time; she needed professional medical care.

Apollo didn't appear to be as badly hurt, but there was blood matted in his hair, and the bandage roughly taped over his left arm was blood-stained as well. As Morgan removed the bandage, Apollo stirred restlessly, then opened his eyes, staring blankly at the blond man bending over him.

"Just relax," Morgan told him quietly as he applied a disinfectant to the wound. "You'll be fine in a couple of days."

"Who...? Morgan?" Apollo sounded dazed, confused, and his voice was slurred. "What're you doing here?"

"Helping you."

"How...?"

"...did I know you needed help?" The telepath smiled. "Do you really have to ask?"

Apollo shook his head slightly, wincing a little at the pain. Then his eyes filled with alarm, and he tried to sit up. "Dianal Is she...?"

Morgan held him as a wave of dizziness made the planet seem to lurch sickeningly. "Easy, Captain. She'll be just fine once we get her back to the OSIRIS. You took very good care of her. Now, will you please lie still so I can take care of you?"

Apollo closed his eyes again. "I'm imagining this...hallucinating... I must be delirious. You're not really here, you can't be..."

"I'm here, and I'm real."

Gentle fingers explored the back of Apollo's head. Apollo winced again, opening his eyes and trying to focus on Morgan's face. The double image refused to clear.

"What hit you?"

"...don't know. The shuttle exploded..."

"Apollo, I want you to try to tell me exactly what happened."

"We were...in the atmosphere. There was an explosion...in the rear of the shuttle..." Apollo closed his eyes wearily. It was hard to talk, hard to think, to remember. Too hard. He drifted into darkness.

His face grim, Morgan hurried back to his Viper, intending to contact the OSIRIS, order a shuttle, and get proper help for his two friends. But he couldn't raise the battlestar. Electromagnetic radiation from the dying star somehow interferred with communications; all he could get was static. The telepath swore, and tried to isolate the problem. He didn't have any luck. He might be able to blow up a star -- he'd helped do it before -- but he certainly couldn't shut up this star; his long-range equipment remained dead. Still swearing, he returned to the lake.

Diana was awake. She stared at him, disbelief in her eyes. "Morgan?"

"In the flesh." He smiled at her. "I'm here, I'm real, you're not hallucinating," he told her. "If you want, I'll pinch you to prove it."

She laughed weakly. "Then...we're safe? We're...going back?"

Morgan sobered and shook his head. "No, not yet. I came alone in a Viper, and I can't raise the OSIRIS. I'm going to have to go back, at least close enough to be picked up on short-range scan, to send for a shuttle."

"Then...do it..."

Morgan bent and kissed her forehead. "I can't leave you just now. I can do more here."

"I can fly back."

Morgan turned, startled. He hadn't realised Apollo was awake. "You'll never make it."

"I can get far enough to raise them on the com."

The telepath shook his head. "Uh-uh, you're too weak. You'd pass out during launch. I don't want to have to clean up after you crash."

"There's not much choice, is there?"

There was no answer.

"Morgan, no..."

"Look, Morgan, you can control another ship in space, you've done it before. So if I do pass out, you can keep me from crashing until..."

"No! Apollo, you can't... You..." Diana struggled to get up, and Morgan took her in his arms, holding her still and trying to calm her.

"Don't worry, Diana, I'll be all right," Apollo replied, his voice low and intense. "Trust me, please, both of you. You know there isn't any other way."

"Please...Apollo, no..." Diana sobbed weakly in Morgan's arms. "Morgan, don't... Don't let him... Promise..." Her eyes closed; she was either asleep or unconscious again.

Morgan kissed her hair, rocking her gently in his arms. He looked at Apollo, green eyes glittering in the sunlight. "You're trying to prove the Commander's fears about you are groundless, aren't you?" he asked quietly.

Apollo flushed. "What if I am?" he demanded. "It makes no difference. At least, let me try. You've got to." His voice dropped to almost a whisper. "It's the only chance Diana has."

"It's her life you're gambling with," the telepath reminded him. "And your own."

"It's a risk we have to take. You just worry about Diana."

Morgan glanced down at the woman in his arms. "She'll still be alive when the shuttle gets here. I can promise that much. Don't worry, she'll make it." He wished he could be as sure about Apollo.

The Captain staggered to his feet. His body didn't want to move, didn't even seem to belong to him, and he was dizzy again; he felt as if he were floating somewhere outside of himself. "Morgan..." He swayed.

The telepath eased Diana to the ground and was on his feet at Apollo's side in an instant, steadyng him. Apollo nearly collapsed in his arms. "Damn fool! You can't even walk!"

"I don't have to walk, I have to fly," Apollo retorted, dragging himself upright. "And I can fly sitting down."

"Well, sit down, then," Morgan ordered. "You're not going anywhere yet. You need a pressure suit; you can use mine, and my helmet. It's in the Viper." He started stripping off his uniform. "I think this'll fit well enough."

The pressure suit wasn't a perfect fit, but it was adequate; the two men were nearly the same size. Apollo pulled Morgan's flight jacket on over his tattered uniform, trying to ignore the pain in his arm as he moved. The watchful Morgan noticed.

"Is the pain very bad?"

Apollo shook his head. "I'll live," he replied.

Morgan didn't pursue the matter. Instead, he helped the other man to his feet. Apollo leaned against him for a moment, his head bowed, then straightened slowly and took a couple of unsteady steps toward the Viper. He stumbled and would have fallen if the telepath hadn't caught him.

"Are you too proud to accept a little more help?" Morgan asked quietly.

Apollo stared at him silently for a long moment, then smiled shamefacedly and shook his head once more. "No," he whispered in answer.

Morgan put an arm around him and helped him across the rocky ground and into the Viper's cockpit. As the telepath strapped him in, Apollo slumped in the seat, his eyes closed, forcing himself to breathe deeply.

"You all right?"

Apollo nodded. "Yeah, just a little tired. I'll be okay in a centon."

Morgan shook his head, partly in despair, partly in admiration. Then Apollo opened his eyes, took the helmet, and settled it over his head. "I'm ready," he said quietly.

"Sure?"

"Uh-huh."

Morgan started to climb down from the Viper's wing, but halted as Apollo spoke again. "Morgan..."

"Yes?"

"Take care of Diana for me."

For a brief moment, green eyes met matching ones in mutual understanding; they didn't need telepathy. "Here, for now, yes, of course," Morgan said very softly. "But she'll hate both of us if you're not waiting for us when we get back."

Apollo, not trusting himself to speak, nodded silently.

Morgan started to climb down again, then hesitated. "Apollo, one thing. Be careful -- no risks. Your life's important, too." Their eyes met again, and Morgan grinned suddenly. "Now, get going. And good luck." He jumped clear.

Apollo didn't need conscious thought to fly a Viper; it was almost as instinctive for him as breathing. Nevertheless, he held his breath as his thumb came down on the launch control. The small spacecraft hurtled into the sky at maximum thrust, viciously tearing free of the planet's gravity.

For the first few critical microns, Apollo held the Viper steady, fighting with all his will and the last vestiges of his strength to maintain control. He had to get help; Diana's life was at stake. But finally, his battered and exhausted body surrendered to the tremendous forces acting on it. His last conscious thought, as blackness engulfed him, was one of exultation -- he was flying again!

As Apollo passed out, Morgan took over. He sat quietly beside Diana, one hand absently stroking her hair. His eyes were closed, his face that of a man asleep -- or in a deep trance. His mind was centred on a small speck of metal streaking through space. Without his control, the Viper would plunge back toward the red dwarf star, to be vapourised by its fires.

He never saw the small, brown-furred creature that sat on a nearby rock, watching him. From time to time, the large, erect ears and the bushy tail twitched. The bright, intelligent-seeming black eyes in the sharply pointed face never blinked. The creature simply sat -- and watched.

Then the Viper was gone, out of range, and Morgan could no longer sense either the ship or her unconscious pilot. He sighed, stretched, and opened his eyes.

The watcher promptly vanished.

* * * * *

Apollo opened his eyes to star-strewn night, nausea, and a slowly tumbling Viper. He was dazed and disoriented, and it took him some time to realise where he was. He rubbed his eyes, trying to will his weakness and the lingering dizziness to pass. The pain in his head seemed to throb in time with the beat of his heart, and he couldn't see clearly. He raised a hand to finger the bandage at the back of his head, wincing a little as he did so. His shoulder was stiffening badly; it hurt to move his arm. What in Hades happened to...?

Memory and awareness returned in a rush. He blinked in an effort to force his eyes to focus, his mind to concentrate, and did what he could to stabilise the Viper. Then, feeling strangely lethargic, he relaxed, leaning his head back against the seat. His mind wandered, and he began to hallucinate. He remembered...

A small boy crying, and a tall, imposing figure in a dark blue uniform comforting him...

A training simulator suddenly filling with packing foam, trapping a stuffy young cadet, and the two perpetrators laughing... He owed his life to them so many times...

Starbuck, fearing no enemy, but afraid of Athena, running from her... And from Cassiopeia, and Alexandra...

Alexandra? Briefly awake, Apollo rubbed his eyes again, trying to get his bearings, to think clearly. But he was too sick, too tired...

A little daggit, just a puppy, darting between a grown man's legs, and a small boy laughing as his father tripped, sprawling on the grass...

Another boy, with wide, sad eyes, mourning his lost pet, and a worried mother... Serina...

Serina, standing at his side as the chain of an ancient medallion was wound around their joined hands... Landing on Kobol, searching for life amidst the ruins of an abandoned world... Death...

Apollo moaned, shaking his head, and opened his eyes to stare blankly at the stars. Darkness quickly claimed him again.

Death, unbearable grief and horror, wanting to die, to join her. If only he could have saved her... Serina...

Diana, dying on some nameless, lifeless world...

No! Apollo shook his head once more, rousing from his dreams. Diana wouldn't die; Morgan wouldn't let her, he'd take care of her. Morgan...

Morgan... A fight, a face bending over him, green eyes peering into his mind, his soul, refusing to let him die...

Die? No, he didn't want to die, not any more. There was too much to live for -- the OSIRIS, maybe finding the GALACTICA again, his friends, Diana...

Diana, in a long violet gown, dancing in his arms... Watching the rain, not daring to look at the woman beside him, friend, sister, wanting...

An incredible blaze of passion claiming two souls... The flame of her hair enfolding them both, dark fire in the night, a burst of brilliance in the sunlight...

A time yet to be, a little girl with fiery hair in a proud father's arms, a radiant woman with even brighter hair and laughing green eyes at his side...

Home...

Funny, he thought, briefly coherent, but he'd never considered the OSIRIS "home" before. Maybe because he still hoped to return to the GALACTICA some day, to his friends and family. But the OSIRIS was home now, and there were new friends, maybe a family one day. Somehow, that was important...

Home... Adama... Diana... Morgan... Starbuck... Serina...

Apollo drifted in and out of consciousness, not really aware of the difference, as the Viper headed home.

Serina... Diana... Home...

Home...

* * * * *

Diana weakly pushed away the cup Morgan held to her lips, and rested her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes. Morgan's lips brushed her hair. "Feeling better?"

She nodded slightly, not opening her eyes. "Just...weak, tired. There's no pain at all."

"I'm surprised you can feel anything," Morgan said with a chuckle. "I must be slipping."

"You? Never." She sighed, then turned her head to look up at him. "You don't...make mistakes, do you?"

"Oh, every now and then. I'm only human, you know."

"Morgan?"

"What?"

"I do care...really. Only..."

"I know."

"But it... It's not fair to you..."

"Never mind, it doesn't matter."

"No, you don't understand," she protested. "The way I feel about you...nothing's changed... I still..."

"Hush," he said softly, struggling with his own emotions. "Don't try to talk any more. I want you to rest. Try to sleep."



Too weak to argue, Diana obediently closed her eyes.

"Sleep, Diana," Morgan murmured, his voice low, hypnotic. "Sleep. You're safe here, with me. Nothing can harm you. Sleep, my love, sleep..."

Lulled by the soothing tone of his voice, Diana fell asleep with her head on his chest, secure in the warmth of his arms. Morgan sighed, his eyes sad. If only...

The watcher observed, unseen. Its bright eyes never blinked; it made no sound. It sat beside a rock near the lake, its bushy tail curled neatly over its paws, and only the twitching of the large, pointed ears revealed it was alive. Then, as Morgan himself finally dozed in the red sunlight, the little creature slowly hopped closer, until the tips of its whiskers lightly brushed against the back of the man's hand.



Morgan didn't awaken. After a few centons, the alien moved away, watched for a while, then went to Diana's side. Once again, the tips of its whiskers brushed bare skin. Then the creature vanished.

* * * * *

The mood on the bridge was tense. Commander Christopher stood behind Chan, his senior bridge officer, and watched the scanners. Ever since Morgan left after the research shuttle...

"Target on scanner, sir," Chan's quiet voice interrupted his thoughts. "One-man ship, human occupant."

"Any communications, Andromeda?"

"Negative, Commander. The ship's just entering range."

"Keep trying. If you get anything, put it through to my station."

Microns later, he heard the crackle of static over a com line, and a barely audible voice. "...read me? Come in, OSIRIS. This is Flight Captain Apollo. Do you read me?"

Surprised, the Commander snatched a microphone. "This is Commander Christopher, Captain. What are you doing with a Viper? Where is the rest of your party? And where's Lieutenant Morgan? What in Hades is going on?"

"The shuttle crashed, Commander," Apollo's voice replied, faint through the static. "There was an

explosion. Morgan stayed with Diana; she's been hurt. There were no other survivors. They need a shuttle and a med crew."

The Commander glanced over his shoulder at his Executive Officer. "See to it, Colonel," he said to Arsenaux. The Colonel obeyed at once, and Christopher turned his attention back to the com. "Are you all right, Captain?"

"I'm fine," Apollo answered, not quite truthfully. "What about that shuttle?"

A quick glance at Arsenaux, who held up one hand, the fingers spread. "They'll be ready to launch in five centons, Captain."

"The Viper should be in visual range by then, sir," Chan reported.

Christopher nodded his acknowledgement, then checked his computer screen. "Captain, you're cleared to land in Alpha Bay," he advised. "Report to me on the bridge immediately after landing. OSIRIS out."

An explosion aboard the shuttle? The Commander pondered that for only a moment before contacting Captain Hannibal, the Engineering officer on duty that shift in Alpha Landing Bay. They'd better send a crash investigation team with that shuttle...

* * * * *

Apollo blinked and shook his head sharply, trying to force the two landing bays to resolve themselves into the single one he knew must be there. It didn't work; there were still two landing bays, and he couldn't tell which was the real one -- assuming, of course, that one of them was real. He aborted the landing and pulled the Viper around in a wide circle, preparing to make another approach.

Something deep in his memory told him to wait, told him a rescue crew could bring the Viper in, but he couldn't do it. The Commander had said to report immediately. Besides, the approach to the landing bay was wide... He could do it. He would do it. He had to...

The Viper's approach was erratic, as Apollo attempted to judge the actual position of the landing bay entrance. He tried closing one eye; the double image vanished, but so did his depth perception. That was no improvement. Finally, he asked for help.

"Core Control, this is Captain Apollo."

"Control here, Captain."

"Can you give me a position check, please?"

A position check? Colonel Arsenaux bent over the communications officer's shoulder, curious and troubled. The Captain offered no explanation for his aborted landing, which in itself was cause for concern. And why would an experienced pilot like Apollo want...?

"Correct half a degree port, Captain, and roll two degrees port," Andromeda responded to Apollo's request. "Keep your Viper level; pitch is perfect."

"Acknowledged. Thank you."

Apollo made the necessary corrections by instinct; he couldn't read his instruments. Then he whispered a fervent prayer and committed the Viper to land.

Restraining cables and force fields caught the small craft as she hit the deck, preventing her from slamming into the far bulkhead and completely destroying the landing bay. She slewed sideways as Apollo wrestled her to a shuddering halt. Somehow, he kept her from hitting anything.

As he reached forward to release the latch on the canopy, the landing bay lights stabbed at his eyes. The pain in his head intensified, becoming excruciating, and everything reeled around him. Sick, dizzy, half blind from the pain, he climbed from the cockpit, then slid to the deck and leaned heavily against one wing of the Viper as maintenance techs swarmed over her. He felt terribly cold, and instead of easing, the pain incredibly -- impossibly -- grew worse.

Captain Hannibal strode up behind him. Apollo didn't turn, and Hannibal put a hand on his shoulder, trying to get his attention. Apollo flinched as the Engineer's fingers touched his injured arm; Hannibal, concerned with other matters, didn't notice. "Captain Apollo, the Commander asks that you report at once to his quarters, not the bridge. He is most anxious about..."

Whatever Christopher was anxious about would have to wait. Without warning, Apollo collapsed, unconscious, at the surprised Hannibal's feet.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Gregory and Sergeant Alexandra flew the shuttle the OSIRIS sent to pick up Diana and Morgan. They were accompanied by two med techs and three other Warriors. A second shuttle, carrying a crash investigation team, followed; they would stay behind to determine the cause of the crash.

Half conscious, Diana murmured a protest as the med techs took her from Morgan's arms. They carefully placed her on a stretcher, and Morgan took her hand, maintaining the physical contact between them. Diana's fingers closed tightly around his.

The flight back to the OSIRIS seemed endless to Morgan, who was aware of every breath Diana took, of every beat of her heart. He blocked everything, everyone from his mind -- except Diana. Against all odds, she was still alive when they reached the OSIRIS -- and although unconscious, she never once released his hand.

Dr. Senbi was waiting for them when the shuttle landed. Within centons, Diana was in Life Centre. Morgan left her at the door.

A small crowd gathered outside Life Centre. Morgan paced the corridor, wanting to read the news from Senbi's mind, but not quite daring to try. Commander Christopher waited with him, as did a number of off-duty pilots, all of them Diana's friends.

Finally, the door slid open, and a smiling Senbi emerged. Morgan didn't wait to hear him say, "She'll be just fine." He was through the doorway and at Diana's bedside before the words were spoken. After a brief conversation with the doctor, the Commander returned to the bridge, and the pilots slowly wandered away.

Diana was sleeping peacefully. Morgan studied her for a long while, until he was satisfied she'd really be all right. Then he started for the door, intending to go to his lab to finish his interrupted project. He stopped abruptly in mid-stride, as he recognised the still form in the next bed. Good Lords, he'd been so worried about Diana, he'd completely forgotten about Apollo! What in Hades happened to him? He hadn't crashed, had he?

Morgan swore silently to himself. He should never have let Apollo try flying a Viper; he was too badly hurt to handle so sensitive a ship -- but what choice did they have? Without Morgan, it was certain Diana would have died...

And without Apollo, she might want to die.

Cursing under his breath, Morgan bent over the unconscious man, examining him carefully. After a few centons, he straightened, sighing in relief. Apollo was in serious condition, but his injuries were neither fatal nor permanent. He, too, would be all right. He'd be in Life Centre for several days, Diana for a bit longer, but they'd both recover.

What caused the crash? Apollo said an explosion... Not, Morgan was certain, pilot error; both pilots were too experienced, too skilled. And probably not a flaw in the shuttle's structure or systems, although the report from the crash team would determine that more positively. What, then?

* * * * *

For several days, Morgan spent his time watching over Diana and Apollo. Commander Christopher instructed Dr. Senbi to cooperate with Morgan; the Commander offered no explanations, and Senbi wisely didn't ask questions. In fact, Morgan's assistance proved useful -- he was somehow able to reach Apollo even when the Captain was raving -- and since Morgan didn't interfere with his medical staff, Senbi had no real objections to his presence.

From a med tech's viewpoint, Diana was an ideal patient. She slept peacefully most of the time; when she was awake, she was cooperative, obedient -- very different from the restless, fiery-tempered Diana Life Centre knew from the past. But then, she'd never come so close to death before. She simply couldn't spare the energy to fight with the med techs and doctors.

Apollo was another matter entirely. Whether it was because of the head injury or the fever, he didn't seem to realise where he was and refused to believe Diana was safe. When he was awake, he was delirious and constantly fought with the med techs, wanting only to go to Diana. Morgan did what he could to keep Apollo quiet, knowing he needed rest far more than medication, but Dr. Senbi nevertheless was forced to keep him under sedation.

Eventually, though, nature and Apollo's own body succeeded in doing what Morgan and Senbi could not. The fever broke, Apollo slept peacefully at last, and the sedatives were no longer needed. For the first time in days, Morgan felt free to leave Life Centre. He went to his lab, the old celestial chamber that was his private sanctuary, and there, with the transparent bubble open to the stars, he returned to his long-neglected work.

* * * *

"Welcome back."

Apollo stared blankly at the face looking down at him, seeing only light eyes and fair hair. Starbuck...? What was he doing here? Where...? Then he blinked in recognition. "Hi, Morgan."

"Hi, yourself. How do you feel?"

Apollo attempted a weak smile. "Not too bad, considering. Thanks."

"For what? I nearly got you killed."

"How? Letting me fly back? You couldn't have stopped me. Besides, Diana needed you. And I made it all right, didn't I?"

Morgan chuckled and shook his head. "I wish I knew how. You certainly shouldn't have. I didn't realise how badly you'd been hurt, or I'd never have allowed..."

"You couldn't have stopped me, remember?"

"No?" Morgan raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that? When I think of the risks..."

A surprisingly strong hand caught the telepath's wrist. "Hey, it's a little late to start thinking about what might've gone wrong. Besides, everything worked out okay." He hesitated a moment. "Morgan, everyone keeps telling me Diana's all right. Is she, really?"

Morgan nodded. "They finally put both of you in isolation so no one would disturb you. You needed rest, and there's been an awful lot of traffic through here the past few days..."

Apollo interrupted him. "What happened to the shuttle?" he asked quietly.

"I imagine you've a few ideas of your own," Morgan replied.

"Yeah, a few." Apollo's face was suddenly grim. "I've been thinking about it a lot. That first explosion didn't just happen by itself, and I don't think there was anything wrong with the ship; I checked her out myself. That doesn't leave too many possibilities. Sabotage, or..."

"I think your 'or' is the answer. The preliminary crash investigation indicates there was an explosive of some sort on board. My guess is one of the techs brought something onto the shuttle -- something unstable -- planning to use it in their survey. If it broke loose in the storage bay, got shaken up, well..."

"If I ever find out..." For an instant, anger flared in Apollo's eyes. Someone blew up the shuttle, nearly killed Diana, and... Then he grinned. "You know, I almost feel sorry for the poor bastard."

Morgan nodded in complete understanding. "And it doesn't even matter who it was," he said quietly, "since the poor fool's dead now."

Apollo broke the long silence that followed. "When can I see Diana?" he asked abruptly.

"Senbi says as soon as you can get up from that bed," Morgan told him. "Now, if you like. Want a hand?"

"No... Not yet, in a centon, maybe. I... Morgan, why?"

"Why, what?" the bewildered telepath demanded.

"You... Look, Morgan, I know you're in love with Diana, and she... It's... So why do you keep helping me? I mean, I... Oh, frak!" He gestured vaguely around the isolation chamber, unable to find the words he wanted. "You keep pulling me out of trouble. Why?"

Morgan shrugged. "Why not?"

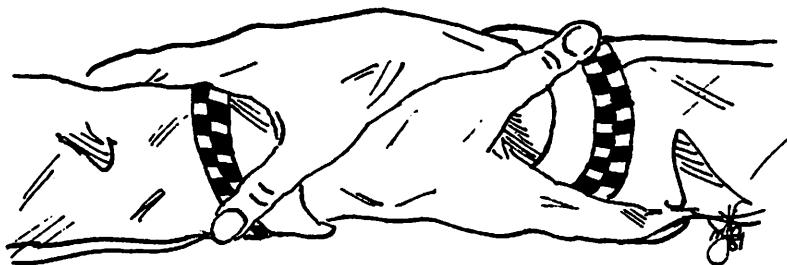
"That's no answer."

"No, it isn't, is it?" The telepath gazed back into the eyes that studied his own so earnestly. "All right, then. Maybe it's because Diana loves you, and what she cares about is important to me, or maybe because we -- this ship -- need you, or maybe even just because... Look, Apollo, I've never been very close to anyone before, except Diana; it's a kind of defence mechanism, ever since I was a kid. So..." He shrugged again, embarrassed. "I'm afraid I can't explain it, not very well, anyway. Only, well, you're the first man I've met in yahrens who I'd be willing to trust at my back in a fight. Can you understand what that means to me?"

"I think so," Apollo answered slowly, thoughtfully. "I guess I kind of feel that way about Starbuck and Boomer. I miss them both, a lot." It was Apollo's turn to be embarrassed; he looked away from Morgan, no longer able to meet the searching green eyes. "I don't know why, exactly, but, well, I guess I feel the same way about you."

Morgan didn't reply for a long time. Finally, he held out his hand. "I know I can never take their place," he said at last, "but..."

There was no hesitation as Apollo took Morgan's hand. The two men gripped each other's wrists wordlessly, in a timeless gesture of friendship.



* * * *

Apollo was leaning heavily on Morgan's arm as they entered Diana's room. He was still weak, and suffered from severe headaches and recurrent dizziness. Dr. Senbi assured him all symptoms would disappear in a section or two.

Diana was awake, and smiled warmly in greeting. Draco, her miniature violet dragon, perched on her pillow, trilling happily.

"Hi, beautiful," Morgan said cheerfully as he deposited Apollo in a chair beside the bed. "You look good enough to get out of this place."

"Liar," she laughed as he kissed her forehead. "I look awful -- but I feel a lot better." She reached for Apollo's hand, as Draco flew from her pillow to land on his shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"About the same -- looking awful, but feeling fine."

Just then, Draco's sharp claws bit through robe and bandage into still-tender flesh. "Ouch!" Apollo exclaimed, trying to push the dragon away without hurting it. "Little fiend -- that hurts!" Draco obligingly sidled closer to the man's ear and began nibbling on his hair, still trilling happily. For some reason, the little dragon considered Apollo's hair a favourite plaything.

Apollo grinned at Diana's look of disbelief. "Well, I feel reasonably fine, anyway," he amended somewhat ruefully. "I'm afraid I gave Senbi and his people a pretty hard time, though. They kept trying to convince me you were okay, but I had to see for myself." He kissed the palm of her hand. "I was so afraid of losing you..."

"I love you," she whispered.

Apollo's face was grave, his eyes thoughtful, as he removed a fine chain from around his neck and sat silently for a moment, holding the object suspended from it. He'd never thought to part from it, but... "Once, a long time ago, when I was hurt, blind, and thought I'd be better off dead, someone gave me this," he said very quietly. "Now, I want you to have it." He closed Diana's fin-

gers over a small silvery ankh.

She stared at the chain dangling from her hand, then at Apollo. "Serina gave this to you, didn't she? I can't..."

"What could be more fitting? Before I found you again, I wanted to die. I had nothing to live for, nothing but a symbol. Now, everything -- my whole life -- is starting over. What's past can never be again. There's only the present, and what lies ahead. You've given me that, Diana, and I want you to wear this for me."

Looking into his eyes, Diana nodded slowly. "All right, Apollo, always, if that's what you want." She slipped the chain over her head, then reached for his hand again.



Morgan leaned against the wall, watching his two friends in silence. He felt a twinge of envy. If only...

If only...

PURPLE & ORANGE?

OSIRIS Publications has the following issues of the BATTLESTAR GALACTICA^{*} fanzine "Purple and Orange?" available for purchase by mail:

Issue #3 - Features the first installment of "Allies," the continuing story of the People, creators of the Cylons^{*} (by a well-known fantasy author writing under the name John Jones IX). \$ 4.00
(52 pp)

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Aegis of Athena
Paul Gordon

"Aegis Of Athena"

(By Paul Gordon)

"You've sheltered me, kept me safe on the bridge, hidden behind our fighters, while my brothers gave their lives for our people. I'm not going to hide any longer."

With those words, Athena closed herself off from her father, and became a fighter pilot. In the sectors that followed, she shut herself off from her friends as well, spending her time alone, almost a ghost haunting the launch tubes and landing bays of the GALACTICA. She became a stranger to almost everyone.

Her friends worried about her, tried to guess what was troubling her, decided it was Apollo's death. They tried to coax her back to humanity, hoping time would heal the gaping wound in her sanity. They didn't know how deeply the wound ran, how much closer she came every day to surrendering to her fears and hatreds and despairs, what might happen on the day she broke.

Time was running out for her. Athena skirted the edge of blackness.

* * * * *

"Frak!"

Bojay looked inquiringly at Starbuck.

"I pulled Athena for wingmate again."

"The Commander must have it in for you. What'd you do this time?"

"Nothing I know of."

"Starbuck, may I talk to you?" Bojay and Starbuck jumped at Adama's entrance. Bojay quickly excused himself and left the ready room.

"Uh, what did you want to talk about, sir?" Starbuck felt very uneasy. The Commander asking to talk to him?

"My daughter."

"She detests me! Why are we always paired for patrols? Uh, not that I mean anything by it, sir, but... I don't understand her anymore. She's been so different, so distant, since Apollo...disappeared."

The Commander sighed. "I know. I keep hoping something will change. Starbuck, whatever's wrong with Athena, no one's been able to get through to her. She even avoids me. I hoped, from what you meant to her, that she might turn to you."

"She won't even talk to me, and sometimes, the way she looks at me... I've tried to talk to her, Commander. I really don't think there's anything left between us that means anything to her."

Adama looked tired. "It's not right to ask this of you, Starbuck, but I have to. You've been like a son to me since Apollo...left. I want you to know that. As a favour, could you try, once more, to help her? She won't let anyone near her. Starbuck, I just don't know what to think or do for her."

Starbuck felt unhappy, and looked it.

"I'm not asking you to pretend anything you don't feel. Just be a friend. I'm afraid for Athena -- what she may do to herself, or to some one else. Salik says there's nothing he can do unless she lets him, or breaks. I don't want to see that happen. She's a good Warrior, as well as my daughter."

Starbuck saw the lines of tension on Adama's face. He understood. He still cared for Athena, and it hurt him to see what she was doing to herself. He knew, too, what it must be for the Commander to ask this.

"I can only try."

"That's all I can ask. Good luck, and thank you. The Lords assist you." Adama squeezed his shoulder, gave him a tired smile, and left the room.

Starbuck sighed and picked up his helmet. He was due for patrol.

* * * * *

"Anything on your scanners, Lieutenant?"

"Negative." Athena's voice was evenly emotionless. Starbuck wondered if anything he said could draw a response from her.

To his left, Starbuck could make out the dot that was her Viper. She kept pace with him, executing every manoeuvre perfectly, staying in formation. She was becoming the perfect pilot, the perfect Warrior. She did everything by the book. But there was no feeling in it. She seemed withdrawn, part of her absent from everything she did. No feelings. Almost like a Cylon...

Starbuck shivered, suddenly cold. A Cylon? He knew how warm and alive the woman could be, how vibrant she had been, at one time. She had changed slowly since the Destruction, becoming less and less familiar. She had lost her mother and her brother, and many friends. Starbuck could understand that. They'd all lost so much. Somewhere in that time, they had lost each other.

Later, Serina had died. Athena and her sister-in-law had been good friends. Another loss. Then more friends over the yahrens. Most recently, and probably the final straw, had been Apollo's death... Disappearance? He was gone, anyway, and Athena had taken it hard.

Being honest with himself, he probably hadn't helped matters much. He'd become quite close to Cassie, and that, too, was hard for Athena to take. But he cared for both of them. Occasionally, there were other women, but it always came down to Athena and Cassiopeia. He wasn't ready to settle down, wasn't ready for the commitment marriage would take. That was probably why she seemed to hate him now, that he wouldn't make the commitment Apollo had. But he just didn't know, wasn't ready...

He shook himself from those thoughts as something showed on his scanners. "Star system, nine planets, directly ahead! Athena, let's take a look!"

"I'm with you, Lieutenant." She wouldn't even say his name as she followed him into closer range of the star system. Nine planets? Did they dare to hope?

It was the third planet they were most interested in.

It was habitable. The air was breathable. The planet was green, and there were water and land in fairly even proportions. From the scanner readouts, there was animal life, but nothing intelligent. Starbuck considered for a moment.

"I'll transmit our data on this planet, Athena. Then let's go in for a closer look."

"Acknowledged."

It took only a centon to transmit the information their scanners picked up. Then, taking a deep breath and crossing his fingers, Starbuck sent his Viper into a dive through the cloud cover. Athena followed.

Their ships flew low over a wild, incredibly beautiful world. Scanners clicked away unheeded as their eyes roamed the deep green forests, the glistening blue lakes, the purple-and-sand coloured mountains.

"There's a clearing, Lieutenant. Do you wish to land?"

"First-hand information is always best," he replied. "Nothing hazardous apparent from here. Let's go down."

In a few centons, they were walking on a cushion of thick grasses, lasers in hand. It was a relatively large clearing in the foothills of the soaring purple mountains. All around them, pointing skyward, were tall leafy trees, promising dark, cool shadows. The air was warm and moist, with a light breeze. In a few centons more, the sun of this planet peered out from its wispy cloud garments. They had perhaps three centars before the sun would pass behind the mountains and darkness would fall.

"This would be a lovely place to stay," Athena murmured.

"Yes, it would be a beautiful place to live, if the Cylons don't find it."

Starbuck didn't see the peculiar darkening of her eyes, or hear her whispered response. "Who said anything about living?"

A slight tremor ran through the ground. After a centon, all was still again.

"Well, scanners did report a lot of seismic activity in this area. Nothing serious, though."

"Did you notice," Athena asked distractedly, "the birds stopped singing just before the tremor?"

Starbuck thought a micron, then nodded. "And they're just starting up again. Maybe they have a sense for it. It seems okay now. Let's see what we can find out before dark."

"I'll send word to the GALACTICA not to expect us for a couple of centars."

"You don't want to stay the night? The GALACTICA'll be passing near tomorrow." Starbuck smiled at her. "We haven't spent a night together in quite a while."

Athena didn't look amused. She simply turned and walked back to her Viper.

Starbuck mentally cursed the idiocy of his comment. Athena'd had no interest in the word games and teasing they'd once enjoyed for quite some time. However, he hadn't expected the flash of anger he'd seen in her eyes as she turned.

"Athena?" he called after her.

She turned. "Lieutenant?" There was cool detachment in her voice and eyes.

"Uh, nothing. I'll start on ahead. Follow when you're ready."

She nodded.

In a few steps, Starbuck was under a living, rustling canopy. He waited a centon for his eyes to adjust, listening to the life around him. Leaves rustled in the breeze. Slight motions marked the places where small animals scurried away from his presence. Bird noises echoed above his head. Somewhere farther away, he thought he heard a call of some kind. Likely a predator, maybe a big one. He checked his laser before proceeding.

It was hard to be alert for danger when his senses wanted only to delight in the world around him. He knew he was getting careless when a crawlion of some kind dropped in front of his nose, hanging by a thread, and he jumped back, tripping and sprawling full length in the dirt. Back on his feet, Starbuck dusted himself off and watched the insect run up the thread and disappear behind a leaf.

He whirled at a delicate cough behind him, and was staring, chagrined, into Athena's slightly mocking blue eyes. She didn't say a word.

"About time you caught up to me..." he began.

She raised her hand, a warning in her eyes. "Listen! No birds!"

It was true. The bird sounds had stopped. Another small tremor disturbed the ground. Not far from them, a tree lost purchase. They heard the crash as it fell, knocking down a smaller shrub and thudding into the black dirt. A small cry sounded, weak and wounded. They ran.

Under a heavy branch of the fallen tree, a small brown creature struggled to pull its wounded body free. Its cries were like those of a small child, hurt without knowing why or where the pain came from. The slim animal was bleeding, an almost-red fluid leaking from torn skin and spilling into the ground. A bone stuck free from one wound, broken and sharp. The youngling had not long to live.

"Oh!" Athena's voice was a soft cry. She ran forward, distressed.

Starbuck caught her wrist. "It might be dangerous! It's hurt! Wait!"

She pulled free and dropped down next to the animal, gathering the small head into her lap. Light brown eyes blinked up at her, and another small whimper bled from its throat. Then the eyes glazed over, and the struggles ceased.

Starbuck felt a flash of grief. Poor thing! But they wouldn't have been able to help it. He saw a tear on Athena's face. She slowly lay the head on the dirt, then rose to unsteady feet. Small drops of the creature's blood stained her pants and one sleeve. He took her arm to steady her.

She yanked free again, lips tight together, a few tears clinging to her eyelashes. She was angry. At him? Why?

"We couldn't have done anything for it."

She glared at him.

"Athena?"

"What do you care!?"

Starbuck stared, open-mouthed. Anger rose. He grabbed her arms.

"Listen, Athena! It was an animal! We couldn't have helped it, anyway! Why are you acting like it's my fault the animal stumbled under a falling tree?"

She sagged against him. He put his arms around her, suddenly sorry for his angry words. She was sensitive, always had been, and would naturally feel sad about the animal's death.

Suddenly, she shoved him away. Starbuck flailed backwards into dirt and tree branches.

"Hey!"

Athena was running away from him! By the time he disentangled himself from the tree branches and was on his feet, she'd vanished into the woods.

"Athena!" His call echoed, but there was no answer. Cursing, he made to follow her, wincing as he realised an ankle hurt. He'd caught it in the branches, probably twisted it a bit. Well, he'd have to walk the pain out, if Athena was going to be stubborn about it. He limped after her.

Logically, Starbuck had no chance of catching her if she didn't want to be caught. With his sprained ankle, she would have no trouble outrunning him, and she had a world of places to choose from if she decided to hide. He stumbled along after Athena, hoping it was her trail he was following, and not some other creature's. He used his laser to mark the trail he followed. The last thing he wanted was to be lost here in uncharted wilderness with night coming.

"Athena?" He stopped to rest a centon, half-hoping she would answer him. "Where are you? Dammit, woman, answer me!"

Only the wind responded. He froze. No birdsongs! Again, the land quaked, stronger this time. Starbuck found himself sitting down very unexpectedly as the rock he'd been leaning against suddenly fell over.

Ouch! Another sore spot to be careful of! It occurred to Starbuck that if one wasn't careful, it would be very easy to die here. Falling trees, falling rocks, constant earthquakes, and likely some very fierce predators waiting for the unwary. Athena! In her flight, she might run headlong into some fatal danger! He turned his mind from an ugly picture of Athena lying whimpering and dying somewhere along the trail, and hurried on.

Something large was rustling in the bushes just off the trail. He froze in his tracks.

"Athena?"

No response for a centon. Then more rustling. Suddenly, another of the small brown creatures broke from the underbrush, crossing the trail ahead of him, rushing in panic. Close behind it was a larger, tawny-coloured creature. Starbuck got an impression of sharp teeth, long claws, and strong muscles from the lean body streaking past him. Fortunately, the animal ignored him in the chase. Another centon, and a death squeal rang desperately through the forest. Starbuck shuddered as the sound died rapidly away. Then he ran.

He thought he heard an answering cry, a scream that was definitely human, definitely female. He caught a glimpse of a pilot's uniform before the woman wearing it bolted again.

He pulled up short, nearly running into the long, thick snake coiled in the path ahead. The reddish eyes stared hypnotically at him. He was unable to tear his gaze away. The snake uncoiled and moved closer to him. Somehow, he couldn't fire. It circled his ankle, drawing tight, stopping circulation. There were many more feet of the monstrous creature. He had a momentary glimpse of those

coils circling his body, reaching his throat, strangling the life from him.

Starbuck fired his laser. The snake flopped onto the trail. Sidling around its dead form, he resumed the search for Athena, knowing she couldn't be far ahead of him now.

The trail ended abruptly, in a maze of massive stone spread across an open plain in strange formations. Completely overgrown with vines and grasses, they couldn't be seen from the air, but from between the stones it was obvious they were not naturally placed. These were the ruins of a community -- non-human, but intelligent. Some life form had placed these here.

Athena had stopped as well. She was staring in awe as her fingers traced a carving on one wall. She didn't even look as Starbuck approached her.

"They're ancient, they have to be," she murmured, animosity and fear apparently forgotten. "They may even be as old as Kobol."

Starbuck had to agree with her. The ruins did look ancient. The stones were tumbled about, overgrown. What carving was visible, was weatherbeaten. Many of the stones appeared to have been green; others had been dyed a green shade. The carvings were of plants and animals, of natural things from the land around them. It was a very peaceful, quiet place, and gave the impression it had always been that way.

After a bit of exploration, the two Warriors found a broad plaza area, with taller groups of stone around it. They had no way of knowing whether this was the centre of the community or not, but it had probably been of importance. Here, the stone had borne the years less well. There were fallen pillars and large chips of rock everywhere.

"Thousands of yahrens of unstable rocks. It's a wonder there's anything left at all," Starbuck said in a hushed voice.

"I wonder what happened to the inhabitants," Athena murmured.

"Too bad we don't have time for a thorough study. It doesn't look like the level of technology was very high."

"Maybe it's just an outlying city. What do you think happened to the beings who lived here?"

Starbuck shook his head. "All I can guess is that it was abandoned. There aren't any signs of fire or warfare. Of course, a few thousand yahrens could erase those signs..." His voice trailed away as he realised Athena was paying him no attention.

"Abandoned." She sighed, then looked up sharply.

Sure enough, it was time for another quake. This was the most violent one they'd experienced on the planet. Several more pillars shook and fell, splintering on the ground. The Warriors kept their balance. In a centon, the tremor ended.

Athena stared at one of the fallen columns. "It's as if the world wanted to get rid of the signs of habitation. All wild, all natural, without scars of civilisation."

"Don't you think that's a little morbid?"

She shrugged. "We don't belong here. The living don't belong on a dead world."

Starbuck felt another cold chill along his spine. He couldn't shake a peculiar feeling... A feeling of what? Foreboding? He decided he'd feel better when they were back on the GALACTICA. Something about Athena today disturbed him more than usual. It was as if she'd made a decision about something, in a way he wasn't going to like.

"Let's see what else there is around here." He led the way back to the edge of the community. A large section of stone wall had fallen near the trail, and more of it hung precariously near it. The quakes were doing their best to destroy the already ruined city.

"I'm surprised there's anything left of this place," Starbuck commented, hoping Athena would say something. "The quakes must be an occasional thing, seasonal, maybe, or related to cycles of the sun or moons."

There was no answer. Athena was staring at a section of rock that hung loosely, nearly over her head.

"Athena?"

"It doesn't look very well anchored," she said softly. "It'll probably come down in the next quake." She made no move to stand away from it. Starbuck had the feeling she might very well stand there until the next tremor, waiting for it.

He was taking a step toward her when a low growl sounded behind him. He whirled, and found himself only a few yards from one of the large, tawny, toothy predators. Its eyes were watching him intently and a long tail slowly flicked from side to side.

Starbuck slowly reached for his laser. The creature growled again. He sensed its muscles tightening to spring, and threw himself to the side. One claw grazed his arm, slicing through his uniform and the pressure suit beneath. A trickle of blood gathered, staining the brown a dull red.

Athena's laser burned a line between Starbuck and the predator. Its attention turned to her. She was on one knee, weapon pointed at the animal, hands unwavering. Starbuck scrambled farther away, finally getting his laser free of its holster.

The creature growled again, breaking a peculiar stillness. Starbuck's eyes widened, expecting a tremor. Athena didn't move.

"There's a quake coming. Shoot it, Athenal! Get out from under that wall!"

She continued to stare down the animal. Suddenly, it bolted, disappearing into the forest as rapidly as it had appeared. A slight tremor loosened rock.

"Athenal!"

Starbuck practically threw himself at the silent woman who knelt with death in her eyes, dropping his laser somewhere. He caught her around the waist, and was pulling her away from the rock overhang when she began to struggle with him.

"Get your hands off me!"

A second tremor, building rapidly in intensity. They couldn't stay on their feet.

As Starbuck fell, he saw the rock begin to topple. With a desperate surge of strength, he hurled Athena from him, out of range of the falling wall. He scrambled futilely as the stone collapsed above him, almost in slow motion. A large chunk of it struck his head, sending him spiraling into black unconsciousness. He lay still. The wall fell.

* * # * *

Athena came to with a splitting headache. When Starbuck threw her out of the path of falling stone, he hurled her into the path of a falling tree. Head and trunk collided. Fortunately, there was no serious damage.

The young tree lay next to her. Athena shook her head to clear it. From the shadows, nearly a centaur had passed. There was less than a centaur left until the sun disappeared behind the mountains.

Her eyes roamed to where a wall had stood. Now, there was just a pile of stone rubble. She stumbled closer.

There was Starbuck. He lay half on his side, nearly buried in the rubble. His golden blond hair was matted reddish-brown in one patch. His face was pale. She couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

Panic welled up momentarily. Then she quelled it. What did it matter if he was dead or alive, she asked herself. After all, he was the cause of most of her problems, anyway.

"Lieutenant?" She supposed she ought to find out for sure. She stumbled unsteadily closer and knelt at his side. "Starbuck?" Her fingers found a pulse in his throat, steady, but not as strong as it ought to be. She rocked back on her heels, face devoid of expression. What to do now?

Well, she could always go back to her Viper, report what they had seen on the planet, adding the final notation that Starbuck died in a rockfall, saving her life. After all, how long would it be before that statement was true? Some measure of sanity or humanity in her rejected leaving the unconscious man to whatever fate the planet gave him. She'd have to wait until he died.

Or she could hasten that death in the name of mercy. Her stomach protested at the thought of killing him in cold blood. For one thing, he'd been her brother's closest friend. Once, he even offered to marry her, before Cassiopeia entered the picture. She still cared...

No. Killing him would be too easy, after all she'd suffered since she'd known the easy-going Starbuck.



"contemplating murder..."

She'd have to make an honest effort to help him, letting fate determine his life or death. Quietly, carefully, she began to gather the rocks she could carry, pulling them from his body and setting them to one side. She owed Apollo's memory that much. Though how two such different men could be friends still eluded her. She'd considered the matter often since Apollo's death, and was never able to reach a conclusion.

Starbuck was lucky. Somehow, the rocks had braced themselves together, hadn't crushed his body to a bloody pulp.

Long centons passed before there was any sign of returning life. Then Starbuck groaned. His eye-lids fluttered, and he was staring blearily up at Athena. He smiled weakly.

"Hi, beautiful."

Lords, she hated the two-faced...

Her grab at a stone was rough. He gasped as pain ran with lightning speed from a pinned leg through his body. His hand clenched tightly on her arm.

"Sorry, Starbuck. I didn't mean to hurt you," she said. Her voice was almost gentle. Her hands were gentler as she tried again to shove aside the large rock. No good. The man looked to be in enough pain as it was, without grating his leg on a block of stone.

He managed another smile. "I didn't know if you'd be here when I came to," he said.

She didn't smile. "I almost wasn't."

Starbuck refused to betray the shock he felt at hearing that. "I'm glad you are. I wouldn't want to be here alone."

"Certainly." Her eyes were still blank, her face empty of feelings. Starbuck quelled the rising panic he felt. This woman might kill him; he could sense the possibility in her. Why? Equally important, how could he prevent it?

"I can't raise these stones. They're too heavy."

"Could you slice them apart with your laser?" he asked, after a centon.

She shrugged. "I probably could, but my laser's buried under the rocks. How about yours?"

Starbuck looked around, trying to remember what he'd done with his weapon. "Damn! I think it's buried, too."

They regarded each other for several centons.

"Is there anything else you can try?"

She looked around, apparently intent on the scenery. "It's almost night. I wouldn't want to try anything dangerous in the dark. If a block slipped or something..."

She didn't need to finish the statement.

"You'll have to go back to our Vipers, set a distress beacon. We'll need our survival packs. There are knives included, so at least we'll have weapons. A fire and some supper would be nice, too."

Telling her to go back to the Vipers might be his death warrant, Starbuck realised. She may have been waiting for an excuse to leave him, but he had no other choice. This way, they'd wait until his injuries killed him or some wandering predator came by. He wondered how long it would be before the GALACTICA sent a search party, how long after that before they were found.

Athena was apparently considering those possibilities, too. If she walked slowly, didn't get back until after full dark, got lost somewhere, leaving him to face darkness alone... She doubted the night stalkers would leave such easy prey unmolested for long. Just take her time, be sure of her path...

She remembered the animal dying under the tree, crushed, remembered the bloody fangs of the predator tearing at the other small creature. She shuddered at the thought of Starbuck torn to bloody pieces, maybe before her eyes. No. That, at least, she would spare him. She knew she couldn't bear his dying screams.

A twinge spread through Starbuck, radiating from somewhere near his stomach. Internal injuries?

Quite possible. The orangish creatures with fangs might never get a chance at him.

"Athena, you'd better go now, so you don't have to wander in the dark."

"I don't want to leave you alone."

"I'll be fine. Go, please. If we wait, it may be too late for me."

She finally got to her feet, turning to walk down the trail. Starbuck watched her, feeling suddenly very alone.

"Athena?"

She turned, questioningly.

"Be careful. I... Never mind. Please hurry."

She nodded and vanished in the lowering dark.

Starbuck sighed. He'd almost begged her to stay. He wasn't sure, but he thought he'd seen something different in her face, something he hadn't seen in quite a while. He hoped she would return. If not, he hoped he didn't have to wait too long.

* * * * *

In near darkness, a slender woman hastened silently along an animal trail. Athena carried two emergency survival packs, and already had one of the knives strapped to her thigh. She carried the other in her free hand. She was as cautious as it was possible to be in strange terrain at night.

It took only a few centons to collect branches and get a fire started, nestled in a hollow surrounded by fallen stones. In the warm light, she took a good look at Starbuck. He was unconscious again, or sleeping, breathing naturally but shallowly. His face was paler than she remembered. She felt suddenly very protective of his still form. After all that had happened, how could being near him still affect her this way?

Leaning over him, Athena dropped a light kiss on his lips. She pulled away as a hand reached up to stroke her hair. She stared into his blue eyes.

"You do still care for me," he said softly, with a small smile.

She jerked away, angry. "Hah!"

Something sad touched his smile.

"Caring for you has been my downfall, the downfall of anyone who lets you near them!"

His eyes opened wide, startled.

"You aren't capable of caring for anyone, not the way we've cared for you!"

His face seemed to have greyed, as he stared, uncomprehending.

"You don't care about me, you never did! All you love is yourself! Even my brothers, oh, my brothers..."

"What...?" He tried to sit up, but couldn't manage it.

"That was your patrol Zac took! And Zac died! You might have made it, you had experience and skill he never got!"

A vision of a young man begging for that patrol floated before Starbuck. What answer could he give her?

She almost screamed at him, eyes bright with tears and anger and fear, memories of haunting dreams torturing her. She gasped sharply.

"Then Serina! You led the Cylons to her, to all of us! My brother's wife! How many deaths are yours from Kobol?"

Her words slashed his emotions, forced him to recall incidents he had only peripheral control of, if that much. The memories hurt. His breath caught in a sob.

"No... Athena, please..."

"Apollo!" She shook her head, tears running, body heaving with sorrow. "You came back without him! How could you, Starbuck, how could you? He trusted you, he put his life in your hands more than once! You let him down, you let us all down. Why? You couldn't help him?"

"Athena..." His hands were clenched, nails biting into his palms as his teeth bit wounds in his lips. All the ghosts of the past were summoned with her words. "I did what I could! For him, for the others, always! Athena, please, don't...Athena..." He was crying, too, as she ripped through his mind.

"You didn't even care for me. I was just a pretty toy for you. You didn't even have the humanity to tell me it was over. Why, Starbuck? Why did you do this to me?"

He could only watch her cry, wide-eyed, miserable, stunned.

Then she was screaming again.

"You're responsible for my brothers, Starbuck! But you're not responsible enough to face me!"

"Then kill me!" he managed to spit out. Anger and pain warred in his torn emotions. "Take your knife, and end both our miseries!" Then he was whispering. "One quick stroke, Athena. That's all it'll take. Then it'll be over. I won't have to live with doubt or irresponsibility or indecision or fear. And you'll have sweet vengeance. For Zac, and Apollo, and Serina, and all the others. That's what you want, isn't it? To be rid of me? One stroke, and you and Cassie are both free of me forever."

She was still, frozen, tears still flowing, looking shocked herself.

"What?" she breathed.

"Kill me! Take the knife. Across my throat, in my heart, it doesn't matter. I'll even help you if you can't hold it steady." Starbuck was taking a risk. Recklessly, he disregarded the odds that she would actually stab him. Hurt as he was, pinned down, he wouldn't be able to stop her. He didn't consider that he might not want to stop her.

Staring, she slowly picked up the knife. It hung limply in her hand. She moved closer to Starbuck.

"Well, where do you want to cut?"

Her eyes dropped to the knife. She dropped it.

"Starbuck, I can't kill you," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"For what you've done to my family and me, I can't find anything in me to forgive with. For what you mean to me, there's nothing I can do to make the hurts go away. Why, Starbuck? What do I do? Tell me where I stand, so I'll at least know that much."

"You can't put yourself on my shoulders," he whispered. "You mustn't. You have to decide on your own what to do. You may not have another chance."

She nodded, slowly. "So many kinds of death. Body, soul, mind. And so many kinds of prisons. Unless I die here, too, or leave right now... But how can I leave you?"

He laughed, quietly, bitterly. "I wish I had the answers for you. It'd be easier for me, too."

A slight tremor shook them. If it was similar to the earlier one, it probably heralded a serious quake.

Inspiration struck Athena. "With a lever, if I try to push it, the quake might shove that block aside, and free you!"

Without hesitation, she ran for the nearest sturdy tree branch, ripping it free of the fallen tree. She wedged it between Starbuck and the block, ignoring his grimace of pain. A few more microns, and the second quake began.

The block slipped aside.

Athena stumbled.

A long splinter from the branch cut across Starbuck's leg.

He gasped as the wood cut as deeply and dangerously as a knife. Blood spurted, staining his uniform, the ground, the rock, and Athena's arm where she had fallen over him. A major artery, he thought. Frak! In less than a centon, Athena's face vanished. Starbuck saw only darkness. Then he saw nothing.

Athena pulled away from the gush of blood, staring in horror as the Warrior's eyes closed. His face grew greyer.

"Starbuck?" she screamed. "No! No!"

She grabbed a survival pack, scrambling in desperation to form a bandage, a tourniquet, anything to stop the red flow of Starbuck's life. Crying, screaming, gasping, nearly blinded by tears and darkness, she tightened a bandage of some kind.

"No, Starbuck, you can't die. I love you, Starbuck. Please don't die, please don't die." There was nothing more she could do. She pulled his head onto her lap and quietly cried, exhausted, strained emotionally and physically. "I love you, Starbuck..."

* * * * *

Boomer and Bojay moved rapidly through the woods, Jolly and Hermes somewhere to their left. Their calls echoed unanswered.

"Listen!" Bojay held up his hand.

The sound of a woman's sobs echoed low through the trees. The Warriors looked at each other and ran.

"Forgive me, Starbuck. I didn't mean it, any of it."

Bojay lifted her chin. "What happened? Are you all right?"

Boomer checked Starbuck's pulse. Faint, but he was still alive!

"Call the others. We've got to get him back to the GALACTICA!" He carefully picked up the pale form and ran for the shuttle.

Bojay tried to get Athena to her feet. "Athena, are you all right?" he repeated.

She looked up at him, crying. Her uniform was spattered with blood, torn and dusty. Caked red mud streaked her face among the tears.

"Athena?"

She collapsed into his arms. Bojay picked her up and ran after Boomer, into the darkness.

The fire burned itself to embers, then died.

* * * * *

Adama, Dr. Salik, and Boomer stood in the Commander's quarters.

"...the planet?" the Commander asked.

"Beautiful, but deadly," Boomer replied. "Very unstable, apparently shifts in its orbit. Also, the sun is unreliable, frequent flare-ups, lots of radiation when it does. That's probably what killed off its original colonists. The inhabitants of the city don't appear to have been native to the world."

"So we couldn't live there."

"No."

Adama turned to Salik. "How are your patients?"

"Starbuck's in bad shape. He lost a lot of blood, has numerous broken bones, lots of scrapes and bruises, some minor internal damage. But he should live. With therapy and good care, in a few sections he'll be as good as new. If he works at it, he shouldn't even have a limp from that crushed ankle."

"Athena, now, I just don't know. She seems close to an emotional breakdown. She just lies there. At least I've got her now, and she doesn't get out of Life Centre until, or unless, she recovers."

"You believe she will recover, then, Doctor?"

"I have hopes, Commander."

"Thank you, Salik. You may both go. I want to see my daughter."

* * * * *

Athena stared at the ceiling. The vision in her mind was of a dead Warrior on an alien world, herself stained with blood that wouldn't wash off. She sighed. Starbuck. What had she done to him? She had to see him, to be sure he was all right.

She gathered herself wearily to her feet, wrapping the blanket around herself, and padded barefoot into the next compartment, where Starbuck was. He had left the life tube the day before. She walked to his bed and peered down at him.

He seemed to know she was there, because he opened his eyes and regarded her silently for several centons.

"Hello, Athena."

"Hello, Starbuck. How are you?"

He smiled a little. "Better. How are you?"

She shook her head.

"You saved my life, Athena."

"I almost took it myself."

"But you didn't."

Silence.

"Athena, I've had a lot of time to think."

"So have I."

"There's something I want you to know, first. You may have been right with some of what you said down there."

"I had no right to say any of it."

"You needed to say it. That's what was troubling you. There were things you weren't saying. Don't let that happen to you again. Things just eat away at you if you don't say what you think and feel."

She watched silently.

"Maybe I haven't treated you the best, but I never meant to hurt you. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to say this."

"Yes, I do. Athena, I've never been very good at this sort of thing, but I promise you, I swear to you, it's the truth. I care about you and for you. Maybe I even love you. But I care for Cassiopeia, too."

"I love you, Starbuck. I think I always will, in some ways."

"I swear, Athena, I'll always let you know where you stand with me. I owe you that much. I owe you more, for so many reasons." A hand reached for hers. After a moment, she extended her hand and grasped his, tightly.

"I need help, Starbuck. I can't face myself alone anymore. What can I do?"

"I don't know. I'm not trained to know what to do. I'm too close to you, maybe I'm even the problem. Let Dr. Salik help you. He knows how."

"I'm afraid, Starbuck." She looked on the verge of tears.

"Don't be. Let us help you. Let your father help you. We care for you, we all do. Me included. Athena..." His voice died away.

"I'll try, I really will. I just don't know if it's in time, if I can be helped, if there's anything anyone can do for me."

"You'll have to do most of it yourself, but we'll help you all we can."

They were silent, gazing into each other's eyes, searching for an answer.

Adama and Salik entered the room. Starbuck's eyes were encouraging. Athena turned to her father.

There was concern in his eyes. Concern, and love. Why hadn't she seen that before? A tear trickled down her cheek. Suddenly, she was crying. She ran into her father's arms, heedless of the slipping blanket, and he held her tightly.

Adama looked at Dr. Salik.

The doctor was smiling slightly. "I think we've reached her, Adama," the man said softly.

Adama smiled back, stroking his daughter's hair.

Starbuck dropped back to his pillow, sighing. He felt very, very tired. His eyes closed, and he slept.

* * * * *

Starbuck was nearly recovered. Leaning on Cassiopeia's arm, he made his first trip to the officers' lounge. He quickly found himself guided to a table where Boomer and Jolly were already settled. His friends welcomed him profusely.

"Well, you've finally come out of the woodwork again!" Boomer said. "Hey, what's the story about the snake you met up with?"

Starbuck laughed as he sat down, and Cassie rushed to the bar for ambrosia. "Didn't care for the relationship. Too constricting."

Jolly groaned.

"Mind if we join you?"

Bojay and Athena quickly settled down at the table. There was a light in Athena's eyes that was part happiness and part mischievousness. She even managed a smile for Cassiopeia.

During the second round, an alert sounded.

"Frak!"

The ambrosia was left untouched. Boomer, Jolly, and Bojay ran for their Vipers. Cassiopeia took off for Life Centre. Starbuck and Athena were left alone, still on sick leave.

"Well, you're looking pretty good," Athena said after a centon's silence.

"You're not looking bad yourself, beautiful." He smiled.

"Lot of nerve, though, coming here on Cass's arm."

"And who'd you walk in here with? But it's nice to hear you and Cassie talking again, not to mention you speaking to a lot of other people, too."

She laughed, and lifted her glass. "One battle is over. Now, it's time to resume the war!"

"Huh?"

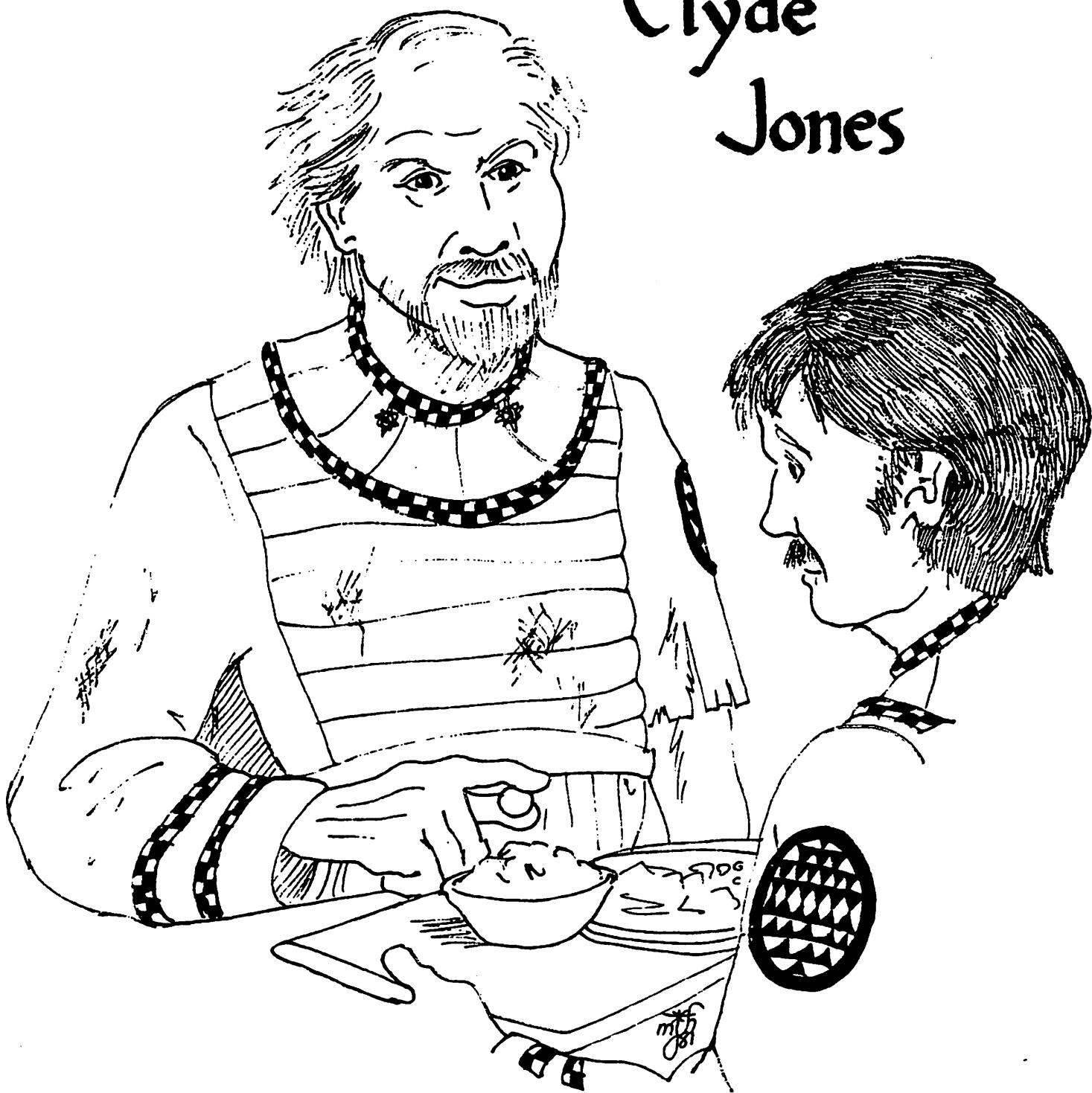
"To us, Starbuck?" She grinned impishly and drank.

"To an interesting war!" He matched her grin and joined her in the toast.

And that was the way it stayed.

Gunnery Notes: K (Period) P (Period)

Clyde
Jones



GUNNERY NOTES: K(Period)P(Period)

(By Clyde Jones)

When you're on, you're on. When you're off, you're still on.

Emergency crew duty, I mean. Any time, day or ship's arbitrary night, when an alert sounds, you are on duty. I have shown up at Crash/Rescue promptly on the hoot of the hooter with my pipes, my spare blasting paste, and my skivvies, period. That's one reason we keep coveralls on hand; we don't wish to offend the sensibilities of the deck officer any more than we have to. Also, backing into a red-hot exhaust cone in your shorts is an experience to remember. In addition, we seem to get all the really "hot" landings.

I know the C/R team in the other bay is competent. They wouldn't be there otherwise. I have even seen the other crew chief correctly diagnose a burnt thumb and recommend ice packs. Not entirely asleep, there. Still, all the heavy damage cases come to us. I guess we are just a bit better on our overall record of saves. We sure try to be.

We also burn out. The human mind can only stand so much rush and hurry, just so many burnt or crushed or mangled bodies, so much flying scrap metal. We burn out. One day a sector, we have off. Totally and completely off. We retire to our caves or cages or rooms and turn off the hooters and ignore the ship. Well, we can ignore it. Usually, we still respond real quick to alerts, even then. But it is vital to our sanity to know we have the option to hide, if we really have to. We can also get thoroughly sozzled the night before and enjoy the aftereffects. Even if there is an alert, we have our back-ups there in case we are just too mummified to move promptly.

That day, I was mummified. Thoroughly. Completely. Happily. My body was operating on combustion processes involving grain spirits, exclusively. I was a living fire hazard. I was off duty. I was also awake. Staring at the ceiling.

What the frak!

I heard it again. Something buzzing a pleasant counterpart to my cortex's ambient noise. I hummed along with it, making a trio. Me, my cortex, the door annunciator. The door?

I raised what seemed to be a hand and fumbled with the large button that connected the door-com. I got music. I got the lights slowly rising and fading. I got a nice cool draft of fresh air from the mini-forest on M deck. I got a vibrating massage. I finally got the door.

"Gmmurph?"

"Sergeant Jones?"

"Glurgnrumph."

"Sergeant Jones, are you in there?"

"Mrunghg. Frunk. Smulch. Wha?"

"Say again, last transmission?"

"Who dat?" I wasn't doing too well, I guess.

"Sir, this is the deck-watch second. You have K.P. duty."

Faint messages crawled amongst my few functioning brain cells. My cortex had a feeling it didn't like what was about to happen. Something made a dim connection in the speech centres of my brain.

"I...have...what?" It must have come out sounding like the opening oratorio of an opera for rock crushers.

"Eep. Er. Ah, sir, you have..."

"Who are you?" I interrupted.

"Sir, Sergeant Tollen, sir. The deck commander said..."

"Sergeant. Listen now, and listen good. I have the day off. Period. I have been scraping Warriors off the landing deck with my bare hands, and holding them together with prayer and sewing thread. I have a bloodstream that is flammable. I have a headache. If I am forced to leave the safety of my bunk, the first thing I will do is rearrange your physiology with a spanner. Scat!"

"Sir, the machinery in the Warriors' main mess is down from the last Cylon attack, and we are short-handed. We have a lot of casualties, and need anyone off duty. You are officially off duty for the day, so...erz."

I had switched on the vision plate I have rigged up for two-way between the inner chambers and the door. I stared out at him. I must have looked like Sutek's revenge, revisited. He took one look at my bloodshot eye -- glistening with murder -- and vanished down the hallway like a Viper firing from a launch tube. I returned to my stewed slumbers.

For about ten centons.

"Jones. Open up. This is the officer of the watch. Your animate remains are required for duty now."

"Sir, with all respect, shove it." I turned off the com and rolled over.

The next thing to annoy me was the direct command link.

"Jones."

I turned a bleary eye upon the visage of my favourite ship commander.

"Sir."

"Haul ass."

"Yes, sir." Anyone else, I would tell off well and proper. Christopher, I just obey. He's one of the few people on this hulk I truly respect. But, someone was going to pay dearly for getting me up on a day like this.

I must have caused a few cardiac arrest cases on my way to the Warriors' mess. I was wearing the singed and bloodspattered uniform I'd had on the day before. It is missing half of one sleeve and several pockets, and was due for recycling somewhere along about last yahren. The only thing intact about it is the belt pouch assembly containing blasting paste, trigger beads, and the detonator. That pouch assembly is unmistakable. On a scarcely animate critter such as I felt myself to be that day, it is cause for panic. It could open a large chunk of the ship to space, mishandled.

That's one thing I'll never do. No matter how spliffllicated I get, the stuff is treated with respect. The latch isn't complicated, but I have a very strong autohypnotic block against opening it when drunk. That is one block I built well and carefully long ago. It works.

All conversation ceased as I stalked into the mess through the back hatch. I just stared at the mess chief -- stood there like a used gallows tree and stared.

She just looked back, backing up slightly, then pointed to the mess line. I ambled over to the only open space, the one where the desserts are served. I picked up a large, wicked-looking kitchen knife and a serving scoop. I began to dole out the goodies. On a very turbulent stomach, I began doling out sweet stuff. My epiglottis fluttered at the very thought of food. I held it in check.

"Gee, Sergeant, I never thought I'd see you here. You look kind of ill..." The young Warrior's voice trailed off. He looked at me; I looked at him. I hated anyone who could be cheerful at this time of morning. Even if it was lunch.

"Is...something wrong?" Arion. That was his name. I palmed a confectionary sugar bead, just the size and colour of a detonator bead, and made a pass like I was taking it from the blasting pack. I carefully and gently tucked it into the top of his mashed neem fruit -- which looks a lot like blasting paste. I smiled at him, and rested my hand on the detonator box. He shuddered and beat a hasty retreat. Next victim?

I found myself looking at the Commander. What? He usually messes down in officer-country. Generally better for his health, considering what we generally get nowadays for food. "Aren't you going to cut the cake, Jones?" he asked.

"Cake." It came out like a gentle expletive (deleted).

"Cake." He seemed pleased with himself. And the chief cook brought out the cake. A birthday cake. Mine.

I'd been had.

Belatedly, I noticed that most of the Warriors at the front tables were ones I had dragged or blasted to safety at one time or other. Lords, what a bunch. You forget how many of our men and women nearly die each yahren. And how many do die. The survivors looked like half-a-squadron strong. And sprinkled in amongst them were a few survey types, scientists, officers, and others I (and my team) had salvaged at one time or another. And speaking of my team, most of them had come slithering in by the far door.

What can you do in a situation like that?

I just reached over to the Commander's tray, appropriated his mug of ambrosia, and raised a toast. "Here's to life. Yours, mine, everybody's. Let life and blood be our bond."

"Life!" Lords, what a roar of voices! We drank, and my overloaded brain toppled into automatic. I don't remember much of the party that followed, except that it seemed to go on for a very long time. I do believe that fun was had by all.

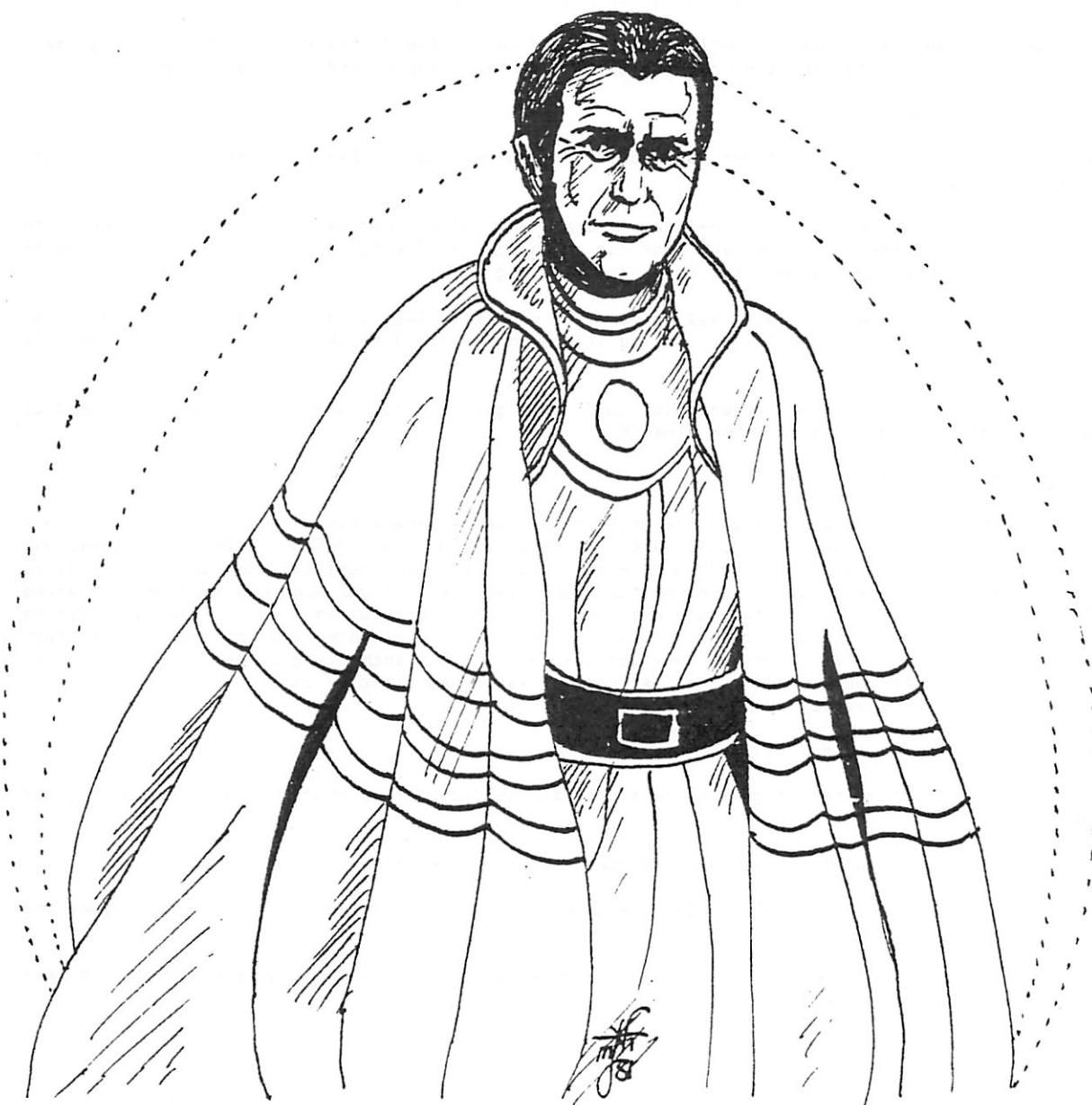
Those lucky Cylons. They left us alone for the day. Lords help them if they had broken up a good Warrior drunk-fest.

I even got a few really nifty presents. If I only could figure out what some of them are...



Revelations

Lee Gaul



"Revelations"

(By Lee Gaul)

A Colonial distress signal. PEGASUS crewmen sprang into action. Only centons after it was first received, Major Electra was leading a squadron in a search pattern. Her wingman was Sergeant Akimi, the first Delphian woman to fly a fighter craft of any kind. Captain Orestes and Sergeant Falstaff flew back-up.

The distress signal originated from a small shuttle craft drifting aimlessly through a star system. The lone occupant was safely retrieved and brought back to Life Centre.

"I assure you, Helena, I am in excellent health. Your pilots found me before I sustained any injuries. Or am I out of line to call you Helena?"

"Certainly not," the doctor said, smiling, with just a hint of a blush on her smooth cheeks. "You do look fine, it's just there are a few peculiar readings here..."

"A minor malfunction, I'm sure. You'll have it fixed in no time." He continued to smile at her. She was definitely blushing, the deep pink complimenting her silver-blond hair and blue eyes.

Her smile dimpled wider.

"Sire, if you feel up to it, Commander Cain would like to see you." Electra, too, felt the charm this individual was exerting.

With a last magnetic glance at Doctor Helena, the man who called himself Baal followed Electra to the briefing room. The walk was over far too soon for her liking. Something about the self-assured, distinguished looking man set her pulse tingling.

"Commander, you don't know how glad I was to see your pilots," Baal said, taking the initiative immediately, extending his hand to Cain. Having little choice, Cain shook his hand, then gestured to a chair.

"Please sit down. Tell us what happened to you." Cain gave him half a nod and a smile, picked up his favourite riding crop, and sat down himself.

The man smiled again and sat down.

"My name is Baal. I was aboard a small freighter that somehow became separated from the GALACTICA's fleet. We were trying to get back to her when Cylons attacked. We couldn't defend ourselves, and we were soon in flames. With over half our people dead, the Cylons must have decided we were dead. We were in the middle of evacuation when the fuel tanks exploded. I was aboard a shuttle, preparing for launch, so I survived, but my bay was destroyed. I barely got out in time. I swung around to the other side, hoping to discover other survivors, but the ship disintegrated before I could reach anyone. I sent out a distress signal. Only centars later, this enchanting Siress flew to my rescue. I am eternally in your debt." The last comment was aimed directly at Electra. Her smile was glorious, and her stormy violet eyes were gleaming.

"Just doing my job," she said.

Cain felt there was something wrong with the story, but he didn't know what. "You were looking for the GALACTICA?"

"Yes, we were lost. Fortunately, we have the coordinates for her final destination."

"You have the coordinates of Earth?" Cain demanded sharply, as everyone in the room gasped and stared.

"Why, yes. You've been lost so long, and we've gone so far. It's been yahrens since we've seen you."

"I know..."

"I'd be glad to give you the location. After all, I owe you so much. You saved my life. I ought to save yours. There's no telling where you might go if you travel like this, with no goal, and no idea where you're going."

Cain's hackles immediately rose. In a back-handed manner, this man was suggesting Cain was an ineffective commander who didn't know what he was doing.

"As Commander, I'm pleased to welcome you aboard. Orestes, show the man to his quarters." Cain asserted his authority.

"Is there a chance the charming Electra could lead the way? I would dearly love to thank her again. And I may have news she'd be interested in hearing."

Cain's manner darkened. "It'd be no trouble, Commander," Electra said hastily.

With no logical reason to refuse, Cain nodded his assent.

In a few moments, the room was empty. Cain sat at his chair, face shaped into an uncertain frown, temper on the verge of flaring, slapping the crop against the table in a sharp rhythm.

"What is it about this Baal that doesn't ring true? Am I afraid to reach Earth and rejoin Adama? Am I so petty that I can't accept taking orders from anyone else, even when it's for my people's good?" Thus he examined his thoughts for centars.

* * * * *

"Your quarters, Baal," Electra said, gesturing about the small suite. "Are they satisfactory?" Her smile expected an affirmative.

"Tell me about yourself, Electra."

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your past. Where do you come from?"

"Well, that's easy enough," she said with a laugh. "My brother and I were born on Taura. Mother belonged to one of the old ruling families of Caprica, but Father was from Taura. He died before we were born. Mother took us back to Caprica and raised us there. When we were of age, we entered the Academy. Later, we were assigned to the Fifth Fleet. When she was destroyed, we both escaped to the PEGASUS. We've been here ever since. How's that?"

"You and your brother are very close?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been Flight Commander?"

"Since we left the GALACTICA."

"Interesting story, and basically true."

She looked quizzical.

"Your father wasn't from Taura. He was a cheap wagerer from Caprica. Your mother left so no one would know she carried his child. The story about him dying is a lie. You've known about your father since you entered the Academy." His tone was lightly conversational.

Electra was pale, lightning flashing in her eyes, wildly suspicious. "How do you...? What are you talking about?"

"Don't be uneasy. There are things I know."

"It's none of your business to know! Orestes and I earned our rank and rights despite our unknown father!"

"You know your father. You talked to him when you were aboard the GALACTICA, those yahrens ago. Your mother never stopped loving him, did she?"

She couldn't take any more, and turned to leave. "I have rosters to prepare. I don't care to discuss this with a complete stranger."

"I'm not a complete stranger, Electra." He caught her arm, spun her around, and stared deeply, hypnotically, into eyes that had enthralled a hundred men in her life.

The expression in his eyes was something completely different from charm or any pleasant emotion. What Electra saw, as best she could describe it, was greed -- basely inhuman greed.

She pulled loose and ran.

The pleasantly endearing smile dropped to a very cold, calculating expression, matching perfectly the animal in his eyes.

* * * * *

Electra wasn't sleeping well. Nothing seemed to help tonight. Her thoughts kept zeroing in on Baal. What was he? Who was he, to know so much about her? Something in her screamed "stay away," while another part of her was drawn irresistibly to him. What charm was he exerting?

Finally she fell into sleep of a sort...

* * * * *

She was walking with three people, two men and a woman. They were all familiar, very familiar. The woman was an old friend, the men only acquaintances. But they all felt very dear to her heart. The four of them stood near the ruins of a ship, a huge ship that had crashed in flames.

She realised the others were talking, and she could hear their words, but they stared past her as if she didn't exist. They could neither see nor hear her. She was present in the song of the wind.

Then, at the top of the hill, Baal appeared, commanding, angry, mocking.

The dark-haired man defied him. Baal grew angrier, threatened him, then called to the woman. She refused to answer. Baal's anger became a mocking rage at what they dared.

She could see the intent written like fire on his face. Baal was going to kill. In slow motion, she saw the power flaring from him, aimed at the woman, the dear friend. The dark-haired man stepped in front of her. The bolt of fire and death struck him. Still in slow motion, he fell.

Baal laughed at their grief. He laughed, and threatened worse.

For the blond man, it was raging grief that his closest friend lay dead, and he could do nothing.

For the woman, the bitterest pill was that death had come for her, but another had taken death for himself, offering his own life in exchange.

Baal's face changed, all its evil written unmercifully in howling mockery of a form that said "human..."

* * * * *

Electra woke screaming. "Apollo!" Shaking with fear and other emotions she didn't recognise, she ran from her bunk, threw up in the turboflush.

"Lords!" she muttered, "What brought that on?" She was still shivering. Baal! She had recognised Baal. But they hadn't called him that. What was the name?

Then a more important memory took hold. Sheba! The woman was Sheba! Electra stood stock-still, reliving the dream. Left behind with the GALACTICA, had it been a portent of something happening to Sheba? The women had been close friends, as close as Sheba had on the PEGASUS.

She remembered Apollo now, and the other man. Apollo was the Flight Commander, and the Commander's son. The other man was Starbuck, who reminded Cain of her and her twin. Not surprising.

Had she seen Apollo's death?

Where did Baal fit in? Why had he killed? It seemed so impossible, so unlike him. Yet that last expression she'd seen in his eyes...

"Just a nightmare," she said determinedly, and returned to her bed. Knowing intellectually that it was a dream didn't help stop the quivering in her stomach or the edge of terror haunting her mind.

Finally, she slept again. And Sheba returned, to walk and talk with her, and ask a final favour.

* * * * *

Today's briefing was in the larger briefing room, with com hook-ups directly to all the ships in Cain's fleet. Everyone had a right to know what Baal would say today. If he was revealing the path to Earth, they were all interested.

Cain was already ensconced in his chair. His bridge officers had taken their usual positions, while Electra and her Flight Captains took up the remainder of the space.

The only person missing was Baal. He took his time arriving at the briefing, insuring a grand entrance where all eyes would be on him. When the door finally swished open, Baal entered, in the white robes of a Councilman.

Cain frowned. The robes were an open declaration of his right to command in a civilian position. Warriors were oath-bound to obey the civilian government.

"Greetings, Commander, officers, Warriors." Baal's smile was wide, regal, touched with condescension.

Cain forced himself to smile in return. "Greetings, Baal. I trust you slept well?"

"As well as could be expected."

"You mentioned yesterday that you have information which may be important to us. Would you care to address this gathering?"

"I would dearly love to, Cain." He turned to face the assemblage. Whispered conversations were quickly shushed, until they stood in absolute silence.

"Children of the Colonies and the Delphian Empire, greetings. As you know, I am from the GALACTICA. I know her destination, her goal. You took me in when I was lost. I now offer to lead you to Earth. I wouldn't presume to override your Commander, but I am a Councilman. I ask only the respect due my position."

Cain felt a sour taste in his mouth. How long until Baal tried to command openly? His stubborn streak was rising. He tried to push it aside. This was for the good of his people.

Baal's eyes travelled the group; hopeful eagerness flashed in nearly every face. For the Colonials, it was a chance to rejoin their people. For the Delphians, a chance to begin again on a new world. He was satisfied. They looked to him for guidance.

Cain rose. "You've heard Sire Baal. Any comments, questions, or opinions?"

(Let me speak, now!)

(Why?)

(If not now, it may be too late!)

(Speak.)

Electra stepped forward. "I take issue with some of the good sire's statements."

Even Baal looked surprised. "What disturbs you, Electra?" The tone was a caress.

"The GALACTICA would have nothing to do with you. So you seek other victims. You try to claim the PEGASUS." She shook her head. "No. If I can prevent you, I will."

Murmurs of surprise were floating through the audience. Even Cain had raised his eyebrows.

"Why?"

"You have called yourself Iblis."

Rage nearly burst its bonds. "My name is Baal!"

"You are also Iblis. You killed on the GALACTICA, and they rejected you. Apollo knows you. I know you. You tried to kill me."

The rage was apparent now, a towering fury the others drew back from. Electra faced Baal nearly alone. Only Orestes still stood next to her.

"You're dead! How did you come here?"

"By the grace of God and love of woman, to save my father's soul!"

"I'll destroy you," he hissed.

She shook her head. "You can't. I am beyond your touch, and this woman has never been yours. Kill, and you are damned again, and you lose this ship as well."

"Damn you!"

"No, Iblis. You lost me."

Cain watched in fascinated horror, strange realisation sinking into his stunned brain. This had to be...

"Maybe I can't touch you, Sheba, but I can still destroy Apollo! I swear one day he will bow to me, or he'll beg for a death I'll never grant him!" Baal/Iblis raged at her, threatening the man he knew she still loved.

"For you, he will do neither." Electra/Sheba was calm, though the woman's blood ran in quick fear of his power.

"We shall see, child, we shall see. I won't have to kill. My touch can do other things to the woman you're using."

Electra felt fear, icy fear.

Baal/Iblis flung a bolt of sheer terror at her. She opened her mouth to scream at the hell he opened to her eyes. Then the fear was gone...

And Orestes screamed. He'd stepped between his sister and Baal. Now, shaking, screaming, eyes wide and staring at some distant madness, he dropped to his knees.

Electra/Sheba saw Orestes/Apollo fall before Baal/Iblis, victim of evil, taking the punishment meant for her. A tearing pain ran through every nerve. Her brother was dead. Her mind plunged gratefully into oblivion.

Pale faces stared in horror. Major Electra dropping, Captain Orestes on his knees, Commander Cain gripping the table, knuckles white with the need for support.

Then, between Baal/Iblis and the fallen Orestes, white flame sprang up. It took the form of a woman, clothed in white, hair and face and form glowing like the gods themselves. "No, Iblis, you will harm no one here any further. I can prevent you now. You've overstepped the limits set for you!"

Iblis stepped back. He bared his teeth as though to spit a curse at her. Then, for whatever reason he had, he vanished.

"Sheba?" Cain's voice was a whisper. He didn't dare release his grip on the table.

"Father." The woman's voice was sweet, gentle, and loving. "I love you, Father."

"I love you, Sheba. But...how...? What...? Is it true?"

She nodded. "As you knew me, I am dead. I was granted a short while to come to you, but now I have to go. I wish I could stay longer, but my duty is done. Remember that I love you, Father!"

Then she vanished.

"Sheba? Sheba!" Cain called into the silence. There was no response. His eyes were wide, staring, with a trace of the tears he would never shed in public. His shoulders swayed slightly, the only weakness he might acknowledge. Cain knew his daughter was dead, and he mourned.

Dr. Helena rushed to the fallen Warriors' sides.

* * * * *

Even oblivion was no protection. Finally Electra dragged her mind from the hidden depths it'd fled to. She opened her eyes in Life Centre. Dull pain throbbed through her mind. Her eyes filled with tears at the memory.

"Did it have to be you, Orestes?" she whispered.

Someone heard her soft cry. In a micron, Dr. Helena and the Commander stood over her. She stared back at them, heartsick.

Cain smiled and took her hand. "Welcome back. How soon do I get my best Flight Commander back?" His voice was gentle. "You've been out of it for three days now."

She wasn't even amazed. She sighed. "What about Orestes?"

Helena gestured across the ward. "He's going to be all right. It'll be a while before he's back in a Viper, though. Baal really tried to scramble his mind. But he'll be fine."

"Is she awake?" demanded a tremulous voice. She recognised her brother's tones.

"Orestes?" She didn't even try to stop the flow of tears. "I was afraid you were dead!"

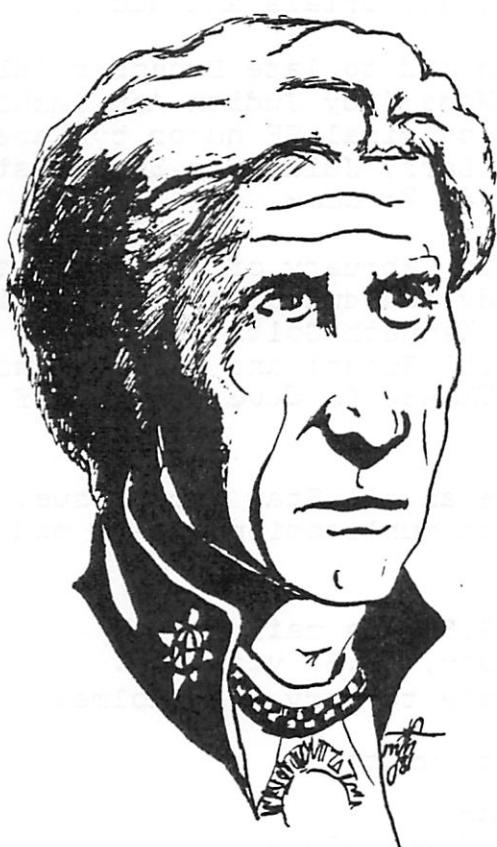
"I wondered for a while if I wouldn't have been better off." The pale young man shuddered. "I didn't realise there could be so much evil in anything. What he showed me wasn't nice..."

"But you're all right?"

"As soon as I get rid of this tremble." He held out a hand, fingers shaking unsteadily. She had to laugh. He could always make her laugh.

"Electra, you'd better lie down again. I don't want you getting too excited," Helena admonished her. "You, too, Orestes."

Cain spoke again. "What happened, Electra?"



"I saw Sheba. It must have been in a dream. I saw what Baal did when they first met. He's evil, completely evil. He would have destroyed us if he'd gotten a chance. Sheba asked if I would let her speak through me, to show everyone what Baal was, what he could do. Is it true? Sheba's gone?"

Cain's smile was pained. "She may be dead, but she's not gone. My daughter will never be gone."

He couldn't help himself. He grabbed Electra in the tightest hug he was capable of. "I'll talk to you again later. For now, just get some rest."

Electra smiled and settled back on the pillow.

Cain turned away. The knowledge hurt. But, thank the Lords, his daughter was happy.

And maybe she would even come back again.

SHADOWSTAR

is a non-profit quarterly publication dedicated to the proliferation of science fiction and fantasy art and literature. We feature prose, poetry, songs and art of both serious and comic nature, and works both original and derivative in nature.

All submissions are needed and encouraged, so long as they remain basically PG in nature. Our primary purpose is entertainment.

Very few copies of issue #1 are available as of this printing. Contents include: Part One of *Double Paradox*, a Star Wars based novel by Mary Jean Holmes; "Mating Flight," a Pern-based tale by Todd and Judy Voros; "Who Seeks Retribution" an original fantasy by Mary Wood; art, poetry, folksongs, short fiction and more.

Contents of issue #2 include: "Munday" by E. Michael Blake; "Transfer Student" an original SF by Kathryn Sullivan; "The Cult of Diomedes," a tale based on the Shadow radio drama by Larry J. Juliano; Part Two of *Double Paradox* and much more.

Issue #3 includes: "Doctor Who and the Energy Beam," by Paul Gadzikowski; "Seren," a Pern-tale by Joy Harrison; Part Three of *Double Paradox*, plus assorted articles, shorts, editorials and such.

Issue #4 should be ready for sale in mid to late December '81. Scheduled contents include: "A Promise Made," by Judith Ann Gaskins; "Shadow, Gremlins and Murphy's Law," an original SF humor by Karen Pauli; "A City on its Knees," the third of Larry Juliano's Shadow stories; and (finally) the conclusion of *Double Paradox*.

Issue #5 is slated for publication in February of '82. Submission deadline is January 15, 1982. Already scheduled for publication: "Effort Under Fire," an original SF by Kenneth Goltz; a segment of "The Plato Patrol," written in part by Bill Roper; and (after consideration and much pressuring) Part One of *A Chance to Live*, second of the editor's three SW novels.

Issue #6 is presently intended to be an all Star Wars issue. Submission deadline is April 15, 1982, with publication due in mid to late May.

Price: Issue #1 \$4.00 in person, \$5.50 via mail.

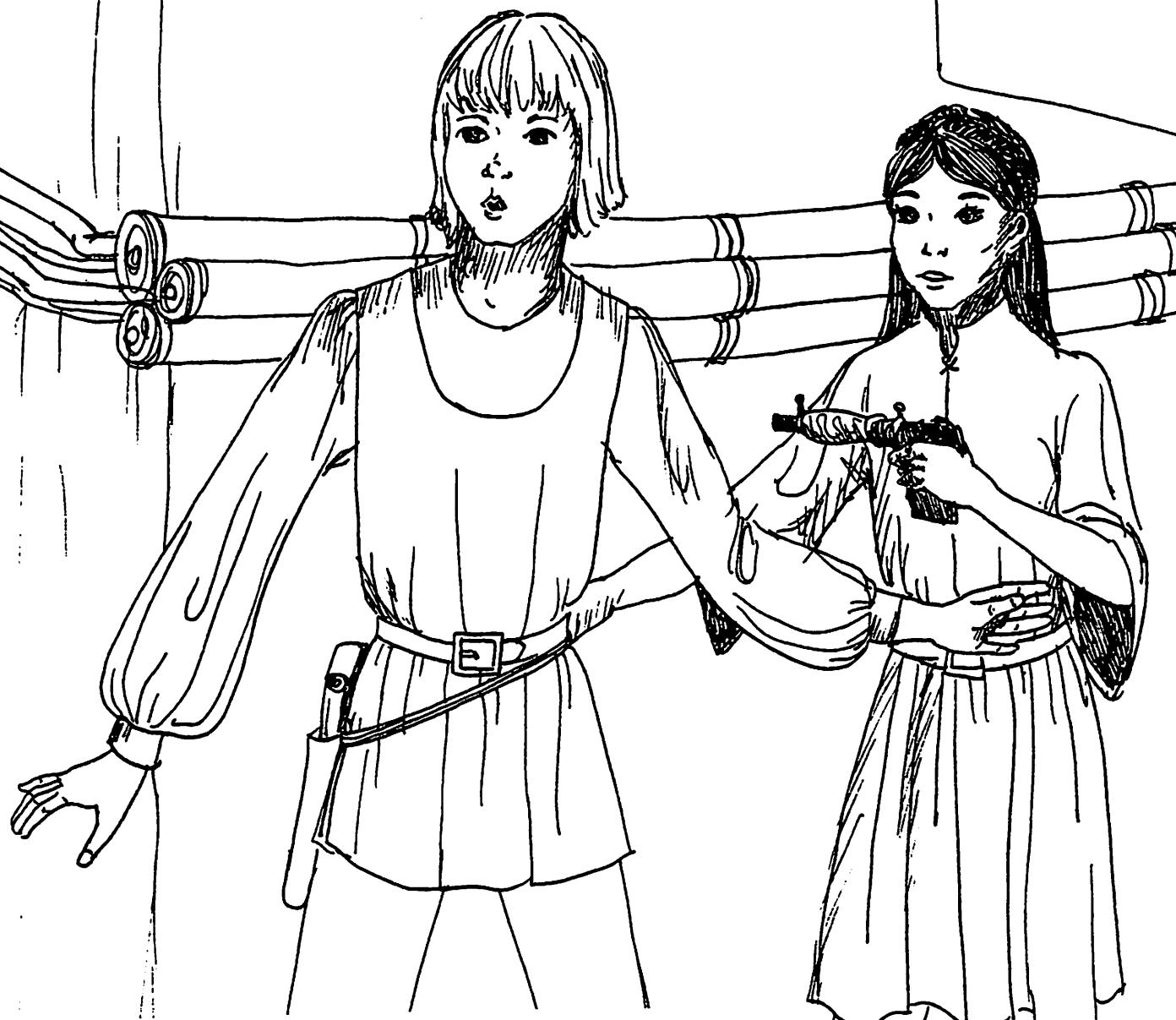
Issues #2,3,&4 \$5.00 in person, \$6.50 via mail.

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3140 W. Howard Ave. #10
Milwaukee, WI 53221

please include return postage if return of submissions is desired



FIRST MISSION

by Gene HermSEN

M. WOOD
1981

"First Mission"

(By Gene Hermsen)

Four young Warriors had been assigned the dangerous, almost suicidal mission of taking the Cylon command post. Captain Troy, in charge of the mission, looked back at his small command -- Sergeant Dillon, a sturdy kid he knew he could count on to the end; Cadet Hera, a dark-haired, wide-eyed, nervous girl who clung tightly to her laser; and Cadet Ramses, a handsome dark-skinned youth, still an unknown quantity.

Troy peered carefully around the corner, scanning for the metal enemy that could be waiting for them. They had to reach their objective, whatever the cost; if they failed, the GALACTICA herself might pay the price with her destruction.

Footsteps! Troy jerked back, pushing Hera into the shadows. Darn nervous cadets! Why couldn't they give him more experienced personnel for something this vital? Dillon and Ramses quickly vanished into the nearest doorway. The foursome waited, breaths held, lasers ready, hoping they wouldn't be discovered.

No such luck. The footsteps turned into the corridor they were hidden along. Troy raised a hand, the agreed-upon signal. As the creature came closer, his fingers clenched into a fist.

The enemy was almost beside them! Thank the Lords, it wasn't expecting trouble, or it would have been more watchful.

Another step. Troy's hand dropped, and four Warriors sprang from ambush to destroy the single Cylon sentry...

* * * * *

After three days in Life Centre recovering from a severe bout of Sagittarian flu, Starbuck was not yet back at full strength. He ignored the four whispering children crouched along the wall -- until they suddenly sprang at him, toy lasers buzzing furiously.

"What?" he sputtered a moment later, staring up from the floor at four elated young faces.

"We got him!" yelled the excited little girl. Hmmm, that one was Nestor's girl. The boys, he also knew -- Boxey, Aquarius, and Ramses, a trio of troublemakers if ever there was one.

Boxey stepped forward, looking most solemn, and planted one foot square on Starbuck's chest. "You are dead," he announced.

"Huh?"

"You're dead."

"Oh? So how come I can do this?" Starbuck sat up suddenly and grabbed "Captain Troy," pulling him to the floor. Ramses and Dillon let out outraged yells and jumped on top of him, again knocking the weakened Warrior flat.

"You shouldn't do that when you're dead!" the girl protested.

"Why not?" he asked breathlessly, when none of the boys showed any signs of getting off his already damaged body. The girl shifted on her feet.

"Cause you're a Cylon sentry, and we just killed you," she said, her wide, innocent blue eyes appealing to him.

"Why?"

"We're on a mission!" announced Boxey. "We've got to capture the Cylon command post before the GALACTICA comes in range, and we couldn't let a Cylon sentry find us!"

"I'm not a sentry," Starbuck insisted, hiding his smile at the three serious faces nodding in agree-

ment with Boxey. This put them into a quandry.

"Then what are you?" asked the little girl in puzzlement. She couldn't be more than four, Starbuck judged.

"Ummm... I'm a Colonial Warrior the Cylons captured, and you've just rescued me. Can I help you take the command post? I know where it is," he said enticingly. Starbuck had decided to join the game.

"Sure!" Dillon yelled ecstatically. It was his opinion he didn't see enough of Starbuck anyway. "We can take him along, can't we, Captain?" he asked, looking anxiously at Boxey.

Boxey looked doubtful. "Well, I guess so. But I'm the Captain, and you're just a lieutenant," he warned Starbuck. "You have to obey me."

Starbuck nodded solemnly. "Of course, sir."

Boxey efficiently holstered his laser, then did a quick scan of the corridor. "I don't think anyone saw us carry out this rescue mission, but we have to move along. Our prime objective is still the command post, and we've only got twenty centons left before the Fleet comes in range!" With that reminder of passing time, "Captain" Troy led the way along the corridor, with "Sergeant" Dillon, "Cadet" Ramses, "Cadet" Hera, and Lieutenant Starbuck following close behind.

* * * * *

"All scanners show clear," Omega announced firmly to Ara, who had the next shift. All over the GALACTICA bridge, men and women were handing their posts to replacement officers.

"Scanners clear, continuing scan of Beta Quadrant," Ara replied, equally formally, after a check of all scanners. Then she smiled and slid into the seat Omega'd vacated.

Colonel Tigh nodded approvingly and turned his attention to the reports coming in from the agroship. Even watching officers go off and on duty was better than watching stuffy politicians take a grand tour of an orchard.

Omega stretched hugely, then took two steps and ducked under the rail to join Athena, Rigel, Thutmos, and a handful of other personnel going off-shift. It was Rigel's birthday, and Athena and Omega had prepared a small surprise for her. By now, everyone else was probably in Athena's quarters, with decorations spread and ambrosia opened.

Even the Colonel had promised to stop by for just a few centons, as soon as Commander Adama took the helm.

Tigh couldn't take it any more. With a decisive gesture, he sent the grandiose speech of Sire Uri into oblivion. Athena winked up at him; he winked back. Then something caught his eye.

Colonel Tigh strode down from the command deck and crossed the bridge in a matter of microns. The scattered crewmembers watched in confusion.

"Starbuck, what are you doing creeping around the bridge of this ship? Were you released from Life Centre, or did you escape?" Tigh asked, quite pleasantly.

The Warrior behind the screen slowly rose from his hands and knees. Starbuck didn't even have the grace to blush, despite knowing all eyes were locked on him in puzzlement. He grinned sheepishly.

Then fury erupted, in the form of four small children, led by the Commander's grandson, suddenly springing from behind the panel.

"They got Starbuck!" Boxey yelled. Buzzing filled the bridge as four toy lasers began firing wildly at the astonished bridge officers.

Tigh stared in consternation. "What the blazes...?"

"We just captured the bridge," Starbuck informed him. "Humour them, Colonel. If you don't, they'll probably sit on you."

The group heading for Rigel's surprise party caught on first, being already in a festive mood. Omega suddenly pulled an imaginary laser and dove for cover, making laser noises.

Athena wasn't fast enough. With a dramatic cry, she threw herself to the deck and lay still.

Thutmos was more theatrical. The tall black man also died, flinging himself to the deck with a laser burn through his heart, but he "died" for the next five centons, while Ramses stood over his wriggling body and laughed.

Rigel wasn't going without a fight. She joined Omega behind the cover of the command deck and also began making laser sounds, buzzing gleefully as she took aim at Boxey.

Omega scored a hit. Dillon suddenly yelped and fell on top of Athena. A whoosh of air showed she wasn't quite dead yet.

Tigh stared, open-mouthed. All this action had taken less than a centon. Starbuck tapped his shoulder. "They're just kids, sir."

Tigh glared, then whirled back to his bridge crew. "All on-duty personnel, maintain your posts! All off-duty officers, please vacate the premises! But, first..." He spun again and buzzed Starbuck in the ribs. "Gotcha!"

Starbuck laughed and took a dive, dying at least as well as Thutmos.

Most of the off-duty personnel were now legally "dead." Hera was protesting to Rigel that she couldn't be dead. Boxey and Omega had a grand duel, resulting in both of them wiping each other out. Thutmos was still dying, and Ramses died laughing.

"Ahem."

The voice of Commander Adama echoed on the suddenly silent bridge. On-duty crewmembers were instantly engrossed in their consoles. From various contorted positions or hiding places, several people rose shamefacedly to stand at attention.

"Colonel, might I enquire what is going on here, that I find my bridge the scene of such...carnage?" Adama inquired frostily.

Tigh looked pointedly at Starbuck. "It seems, Commander, that this command post was attacked by a group of children. We were merely protecting ourselves from being overrun."

Starbuck didn't dare say anything as Adama glared at him. He tried to comfort the weeping Hera, who still insisted she couldn't be dead, as Rigel couldn't aim.

"You were overrun by a group of children? Now, may I ask, did they get by our security?"

"No problem, Grandfather," Boxey piped up. "There wasn't any. We took C-corridor. There's never anybody there."

Adama was taken aback. He turned his attention to Starbuck. The unhappy Warrior nodded. "Completely empty, sir. We didn't meet a soul. Hush, Hera, it's all right, you're still alive."

"Tigh, make a note to discuss bridge security -- soon."

Colonel Tigh nodded. They were actually getting off this easily? Hmm...

"Starbuck, take your dead and dispose of them elsewhere."

"Certainly, Commander. Everybody up!"

"That's *my* job, Starbuck! You promised! You said you'd obey orders!"

"Oh, sorry, Captain Troy. What are your orders?" Starbuck asked, apologising immediately.

"Let's get off this base before it blows up! We've got to get back to the Fleet!" Boxey's voice ended in a whoosh, as he extended his arms and dashed like a Viper heading for maximum thrust. Dillon instantly "whooshed" after him. Starbuck merely walked, carrying Hera, who'd had quite enough of Warrioring for one day. Ramses ran along with his father Thutmos, telling him all about the mission. The other off-duty personnel quietly stopped being dead and decided to go to the party. They managed to smother their giggles and guffaws until they were out of the Commander's hearing.

Adama watched them leave, brow furrowed in a frown. The bridge was suddenly very empty, very quiet. "Tigh?"

"Yes, sir?"

"They actually reached the bridge without being spotted?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"We really do have to discuss bridge security."

Several snickers floated up to the command deck. "Yes, sir," Tigh replied, perfectly deadpan.

"Later. I've got the helm. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Tigh strode rapidly toward the turbolift.

"Oh, Tigh!"

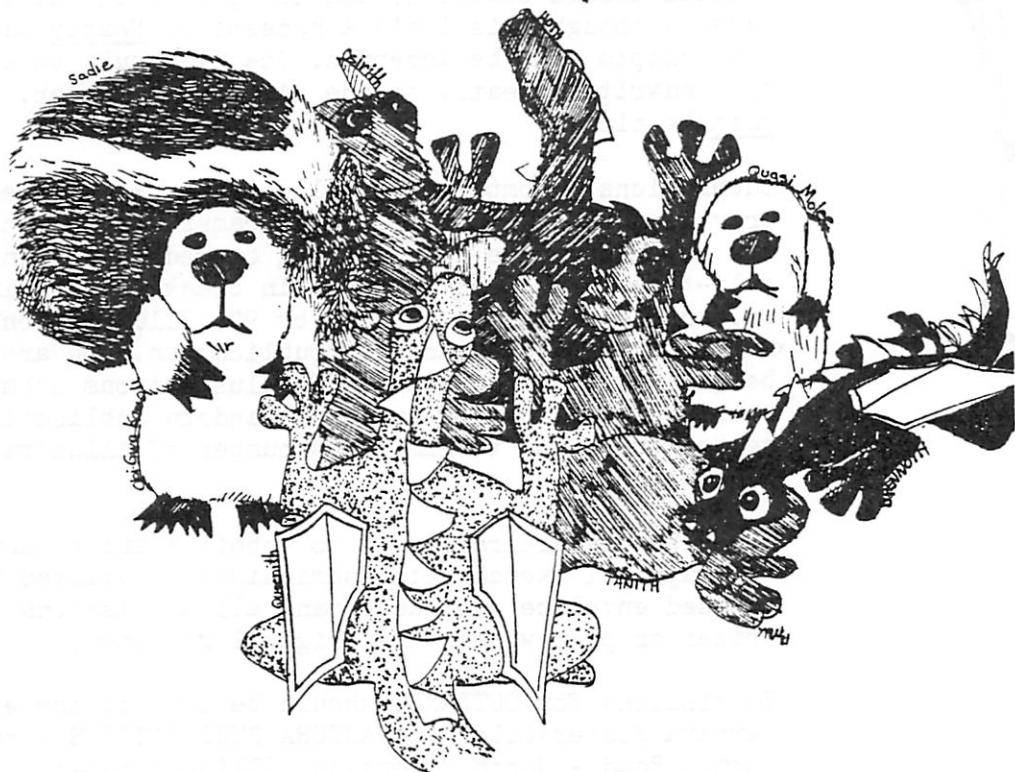
The Executive Officer looked back. "Sir?"

"Wish Rigel a happy birthday for me."

"Yes, sir!" Tigh said with a smile.

Adama smiled as well, shaking his head, then very quietly punched in the code for the blueprints of the battlestar GALACTICA. The next time Boxey tried this stunt, Adama would be ready!

Deck the hallth
with boughth of holly
fa la la la la - - -
'Tith the theation
to be jolly ---





A COSMIC ANTHOLOGY

OUTLANDS is a new anthology series from Pandora Publications, with a proposed debut publication date of July, 1982.

The series is open to any and all fiction or poetry that might be termed science fiction, fantasy, sword and sorcery, space opera, cosmic comedy, or romance, horror, or mystery interpreted in this genre. Articles on scientific fact and speculative science are also welcomed. Fiction and poetry may incorporate existing universes such as STAR WARS, BATTLESTAR GALACTICA, STAR TREK or any other media-orientated genre subject - or submissions may deal with entirely original storylines and characters.

No submission will be rejected on the basis of adult situations, profanity, or sexual content. Pandora Publications will not censor submitted materials accepted for publication. Manuscripts will be edited only with the prior consultation and approval of the writers.

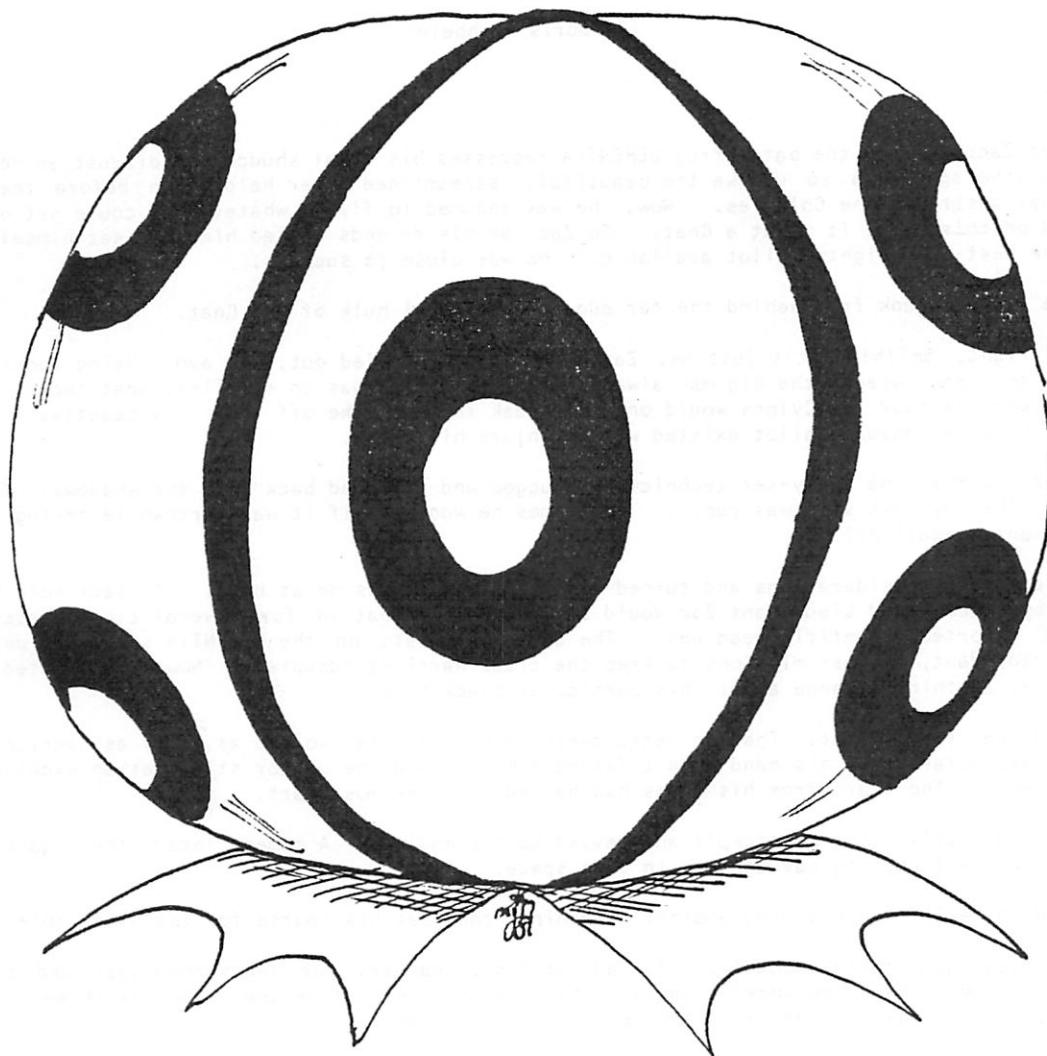
Stories should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper - though this isn't a necessity. Neatly handwritten manuscripts will be accepted. Poetry should be either typed or handwritten neatly on one side of the paper. All poetry must be titled.

Submissions accompanied by illustrations will be accepted, providing the illustrations are camera-ready art - that is, art which requires no enlarging or reducing, contains no half-tones, has been rendered in black ink or similar medium, and is no larger than 7" by 9". Illustrations are not necessary for acceptance or publication. You are asked to be judicious in the number of illustrations submitted with each poem or story or article. Pandora Publications reserves the right to limit the number of illustrations per submission.

Contributors are requested to submit a brief thumbnail biographical sketch with submissions. A stamped self-addressed envelope must accompany all submissions if the writer or poet wishes the original returned.

Submissions for OUTLANDS should be sent to the editor - Barbara Fister-Liltz at PANDORA PUBLICATIONS - 8601A, West Cermak Road - North Riverside, Illinois 60546.

OUTLANDS - the only limitations are those of dreams and imagination.



Visit Through a Dark
Star

Dr. Doris Fishbein

"Visit Through a Dark Star"

(By Doris Fishbein)

Lieutenant Zaccariah of the battlefrog DEMENTIA repressed his usual shudder of disgust as he studied his Gnat, the ugly ship so unlike the beautiful, streamlined Viper he'd flown before the fateful battle that destroyed the Colonies. Now, he was reduced to flying whatever he could get his hands on -- and on this ship, it meant a Gnat. So Zac (as his friends called him) had set himself to becoming the best Gnat fighter pilot available. He was close to success.

A furtive figure slunk from behind the far edge of the metal hulk of the Gnat.

"It's all right, Smith! It's just me, Zac!" he quickly called out, to avoid being conked on the head with the heavy wrench the big man always carried. Smith was an excellent Gnat technician, but he had a terrible fear the Cylons would one day sneak in and make off with his beauties. He also believed the sole reason a pilot existed was to injure his ships.

But at Zac's words, the heavy-set technician shrugged and vanished back into the shadows. Zac shook his head. The way this ship was run... Sometimes he wondered if it was worthwhile trying to maintain his mental equilibrium.

He banished those considerations and turned his mind to the mission at hand. A black hole beckoned from nearby space, and Lieutenant Zac would be taking his Gnat in for several close passes and a number of assorted scientific readings. The astrophysicists on the DEMENTIA seemed to delight in creating redundant, useless missions to keep the crazy Warriors occupied. Now, they wanted to know if there was anything strange about this particular black hole.

Zac limped over to his Gnat. The synthetic parts in his left leg worked as badly as everything else on this "battlestar," but his hand hadn't failed him yet, and the doctor still was an excellent cosmetic surgeon. The scars from his burns had healed, for the most part.

He climbed carefully into the cockpit and revved up the engine. A moment later, the ungainly craft blew free of the launching bay and was in free space.

Zac sighed in relief at surviving another launching, then set his course for the black hole.

The first pass went quite smoothly. Zac adjusted his scanners for the second pass and swung his ship around. Smith had been working on it. The unusually responsive Gnat promptly threw itself on to a direct course for the centre of the celestial phenomenon.

"Oh, frak!" screamed the appalled pilot. Instinct kicked in immediately, and he struggled with the controls, trying to pull away from the collision-course heading.

The ship responded, more to Zac's sudden run-through of every profanity he knew than to anything else. It began to turn away -- only to find the tugging of the tremendous gravity of the black hole too much to overcome. Lieutenant Zac and his Gnat swung on a madly careening course through the event horizon. Space suddenly warped and twisted wildly around him, and the young man sent a desperate, final prayer to any deity who would respond. Then the forces at work overcame him, and he lost consciousness.

When Zaccariah found consciousness returning, he was drifting freely and aimlessly through a completely unfamiliar sector of space. All the stars were out of place for any star chart he'd ever seen. Also around him, he noticed, was debris -- lots of it. Something had exploded not too far from here.

A double check showed his Gnat was still intact, so it must have been some other ship. But what ship was it? Where was he, for that matter? And how was he going to get home again, if the DEMENTIA could be called home?

For lack of anything better to do, Zac began a scan of the area, on the off chance there were survivors. He turned his scanners to a narrow, closed-area search for life forms in the immediate vicinity. Nothing even remotely human showed up, but there was an unusual something else making his scanners jump. He began a visual search.

"Hmmm," he thought aloud. "The only thing out there is that flabby, orangish-coloured mass of something with two appendages. Well, I'll pull it in. Maybe there's some way to communicate with it."

Grappling bars carefully circled the still-wriggling, flabby, orangish-coloured mass of something with two appendages, then pulled it into the small hold of the Gnat. Zac studied it as it lay there, still wriggling, still orangish-coloured, still with two appendages, about the size of an oversized triad ball -- if you deflated it.

"If it could survive deep space, it'll survive 'till I get back to the DEMENTIA. If I get back to the DEMENTIA." The lost pilot stared at his surroundings. Nothing looked any more familiar than it had a few centons earlier.

Fate intervened. The effect that permitted Zac to be pulled from the event horizon of a black hole into the vicinity of an exploding starship now twisted and snapped back on itself, insisting on taking the Gnat and its human occupant back with it. The colourful warping of space around him sent Zac's stomach into convulsions and started his head spinning dizzily. He gave up after a centon, welcoming insensibility.

A pounding headache and an insistent call from the Gnat pacing him brought Zac back to life. "Huh?" he asked groggily.

"Will you wake up, you idiot? Oh, don't be so hard on him, he barely got clear of that thing. So what?"

"Oh, hi, Tribblia. Where am I?"

"Nowhere in particular, but your scanners should show the DEMENTIA off to our right. You're overshooting badly on your approach pattern. Will you get your wits together?"

Typically Tribblia, he thought. "How'd I get clear? I thought I'd bought it for sure."

"How should we know? You dropped off our scanners, and we thought you were gone, but then you suddenly reappeared, drifting away from the hole. What happened?"

"I don't know." He checked his hold again. The thing was still there -- and still moving. "Oh, and I've got something the Commander will be interested in."

Everyone was interested in what Zac was bringing aboard. Old men and young pilots gathered in the darkened landing bay to see what "it" was. Smith muttered something about "knowing thine enemy" before slinking back into the shadows, but the rest clustered closely as the hold was opened, and gentle clamps brought forth the orangish-coloured, flattened mass of whatever it was with two appendages.

It lay there.

The group watched intently. Smith reappeared with a heavy laser wrench in one hand.

The thing twitched. And twitched again.

And suddenly it began to inflate, drawing air into itself and assuming the form of an overgrown triad ball, dull orange in colour. The two appendages suddenly skipped, and the thing was standing on them. They were obviously feet.

The crew stared.

"Cylon spy! It's a spy! Kill it!" suddenly screamed a very upset individual who'd assumed the worst. Mord threw himself at the overgrown triad ball. It slipped through his fingers, stopping a few feet away and "looking" back at him with a smug stance.

Somebody tittered.

Mord jumped to his feet and grabbed again.

The thing jumped away, settling itself on an extended fin of one of the ungainly Gnats.

Smith, already excited by Mord's reaction, now screamed in outrage. "It's attacking my ships!" He threw the heavy wrench, missing the thing widely -- and several crewmen by a hair.

Now, the thing was outraged. It jumped again, straight at Smith, and clutched him around the waist.

"Cylon infiltrator!" Mord yelled, throwing himself at Smith.

Smith suddenly, inexplicably, began to laugh. "Get it hee hee off me! Snorthle. It's haw haw tickling me!"

The thing avoided Mord's outreached fingers and settled back on the Gnat's fin. Smith promptly fled to the shadows of the squadron of Gnats. Mord continued to eye the thing narrowly.

"I think it's cute," simpered a female pilot. "Let's keep it for a mascot."

"I thought the Commander was our mascot," commented somebody in the crowd. He was quickly shushed by half a dozen pilots, who sat on him. Mord inched to one side.

"Let's call it Blackie," continued the young female pilot, smiling brightly at Zac, "because you got it from a black hole."

Zac shrugged. "It's all yours."

"Come here, Blackie, come here." She held out an inviting hand.

Blackie -- as the thing was now to be called -- remained just out of her reach, sidling toward the nearest turbolift. Rapidly.

"Don't run away, Blackie!" she called in some distress.

"I'll get it!" yelled Smith, returning from wherever he'd been, and waving an even larger wrench. "I'll get it!" He dashed after the retreating Blackie -- with obviously ill intent.

"No!" shrieked the woman, Sergeant Pollyanna of Cerise Squadron.

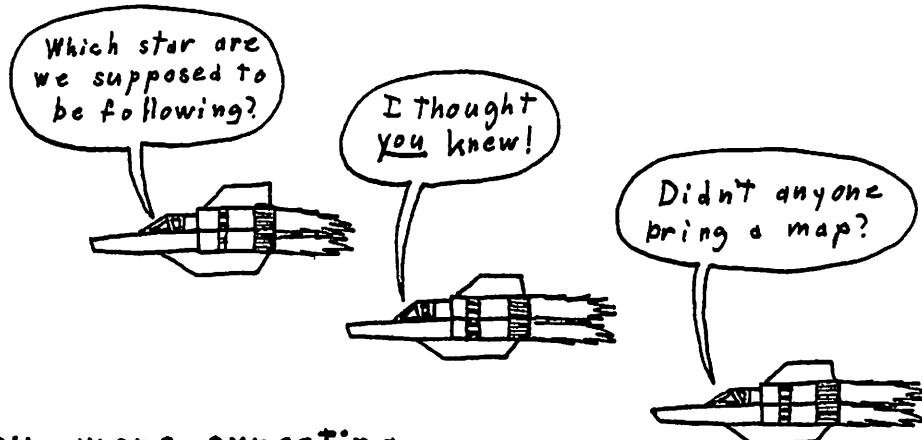
"I'll help!" was Mord's addition to the chase, as he fired wildly with the laser he'd somehow acquired.

With laser fire everywhere, a bouncing orangish-coloured overgrown triad ball named Blackie, a wrench-wielding tech, and a wailing pilot threatening vengeance on anyone who injured the ship's new mascot, it was too dangerous in the landing bay. Most of the pilots rapidly abandoned the area. The rest sought shelter behind and under Gnats, beams, girders, and other pilots.

Settled carefully on a beam above eye level, Zac watched the mayhem with a terrible sense of guilt. A carefully muttered "ahem" drew his attention to another form settled on another girder, just above his eye level.

"Zac," asked the Commander as he clung to his beam, "why'd you do it? Don't I have enough troubles already?"

Zac grimaced and shrugged, then peered down, fighting nausea. Both men watched in silence, waiting -- and hoping Security would be able to handle this new menace to their stability.



You were expecting
maybe the Three Wise Men?
(Merry Christmas anyway.)
KAREN PAULI

One of the Best



"One of the Best"

(By Karen Pauli)

Since Fleet business had taken him to the school ship, Apollo decided to wait for Boxey and ride the school shuttle home. He looked forward to any time he could spend with his son, and lately there'd been so little of it...

Boxey was delighted at this unexpected treat and eagerly dragged his father along by the hand as they found seats. Apollo was a bit startled when the shuttle's co-pilot came around to check that all the children had their safety belts fastened. It wasn't that she was a woman; there were quite a few female shuttle pilots. Or that she was wearing a battle jacket over civilian dress. But that she had to wear civilian dress, for no uniform would have fit over the bulge of the child she would soon give birth to. Apollo was about to ask her why she was piloting a shuttle, and not safely back on a ship, when she returned to the controls, and they took off.

"Boxey, who was that?" Apollo asked quietly.

"She's the co-pilot."

"I know that, but who is she?"

"Her name's Ceres. She's gonna have a baby!"

"So I notice. She shouldn't be flying."

"Oh, she doesn't fly much. She just goes around and helps the little ones on and off, and makes sure we've got the belts fastened right, and stuff. I like her. She's nice. The one that does the flying is real grouchy. I don't think she likes kids. But we hardly ever see her."

An odd pair, Apollo thought. But, the Fleet had to take whatever it could get.

They were heading for the Colonial Movers ship when he noticed a change in the shuttle's engines. It was subtle; only a pilot would notice it. But it could mean serious trouble.

The shuttle pilot must have noticed it at the same time, because here came Ceres again. "Children? Can I have your attention, children? We've got a little surprise for you today. We're going to land on the GALACTICA first, so we can have an emergency landing drill. We're supposed to practice this every now and then, so you'll know what to do if anything ever goes wrong or if we're ever attacked."

Smart move, Apollo thought. The GALACTICA had a bigger landing bay and better emergency equipment and crews. And telling the kids it was a drill would keep them from panicking. If something was wrong with the ship, this was the safest way to handle it. The woman was doing a good job of convincing the kids, who were treating it as some great adventure.

"Is everyone's safety belt still fastened? Good. Now," and her voice dropped conspiratorially, "We're going to pretend the shuttle is going to blow up! Isn't that exciting? What we'll do is, as soon as we land, you all unfasten your belts and go to the door. Don't push or shove, but don't dawdle, either. Outside the shuttle, you'll see a low wall a little ways away. Run as fast as you can to that wall, and crouch down behind it. And stay there until we tell you it's safe to get up. All right? You big kids will have to help the little kids who can't go as fast." She knew them all by name and quickly paired up who would help whom. "Now, you all remember what to do? Stay put until we land, then go to the door and run for the wall and get down behind it and stay there."

Her gaze fell upon Apollo. "And just to make sure we do it right, we have an observer here today. The Captain is going to be watching us and is going to report on how well we do. Isn't that right?" Her eyes met his in a silent plea to please play along with the subterfuge.

"Er, that's right. So listen carefully to Ceres. Who knows? Maybe the Commander himself is watching us! Right now, I better go and check out the pilots on this, er, drill." Apollo decided he'd better find out just what was going on. They might need a more experienced pilot, if anything was seriously wrong.

"Gee, Dad, can I come watch?"

"No, Boxey. You have to stay here and take part in the drill, just like I wasn't here."

He entered the control area and sat down in the empty co-pilot's seat. The pilot, a slight auburn-haired woman, worked the controls with a grim determination that immediately told him this was no drill. She answered the questions before he could even ask. "Turbo malfunction. Starboard engine keeps creeping up toward overload. I back it down, and it creeps up again. I can't just shut it down; I need it to counterbalance the thrust of the other engine for landing. I've radioed Core Control. GALACTICA landing bay is standing by with emergency crews. ETA five centons. Go strap Ceres in back there with the kids, then come back. I've got my hands full with the engines, and she can't fly worth a frak."

The Captain outranked her, but she was the pilot, and besides, there wasn't time to argue. He helped Ceres to his empty seat beside Boxey, explaining to the kids that he had to check out the pilot's landing. He strapped himself in at the co-pilot's position just as they started the final approach to the landing bay. Apollo helped all he could, but several times found his actions pre-empted by the pilot; she was obviously used to flying the ship by herself. Fortunately, she was a very skilled flyer, because she could barely hold back the runaway engine now. It was surprising they made as smooth a landing as they did.

The instant they touched down, she ordered him, "Bail out! Get Ceres out of here!" Apollo started shutting down the controls. "I said bail out!" Well, she had things under control here. Getting the children to safety was first priority.

Half the kids were off the ship already and heading for the wall. Ceres was herding them to the door, so Apollo squeezed through and started lifting them down from the shuttle. That speeded things up quite a bit; it was a big step for little legs.

When the last of the children was out, he lifted Ceres down and half carried her to the wall. He looked about him as he crouched there, catching his breath. All the children had made it to safety, including Boxey. As the crash crews rushed past, he realised he hadn't seen the pilot. He was about to go back for her when she dived to safety around the end of the wall and rolled to a stop next to them.

Before he could say anything, Ceres let out a soft gasp and whispered, "Lords of Kobol, not now!"

"The baby?"

She nodded, clutching her middle. Two more pairs of boots came clomping up, and Boxey's voice rose above the noise. "Hi, Starbuck! Hi, Boomer! We had an Emergency Landing Drill! Did you see it?"

"Er, yeah. Real nice. Keep yer head down!" Starbuck checked on the kids as Boomer crouched next to Apollo.

"Nice landing. Everyone all right?"

Apollo nodded, then indicated Ceres. "The kids are okay, but we better get her to Life Centre. Give me a hand, will you?" Together, they helped Ceres to her feet and guided her to a corridor. She grimaced again. "But the baby isn't due for two sectars!"

"Don't worry. The GALACTICA has the best Life Centre in the Fleet. Where's that med team? They're supposed to be down here on a crash alert! Ah, here they come." They helped Cassiopeia settle her on a stretcher, then headed back to the kids.

When they got there, the area was empty except for Boxey, who was eagerly telling Starbuck all about their great adventure.

"Hey! Where are the kids?"

"The pilot thought it would be best to get them out of here as soon as possible, so we loaded them on one of the GALACTICA's shuttles. I think they're just taking off now. Why?"

"I wanted to talk to the pilot. The way she handled that landing, she's obviously had some experience. I think she'd make a good Viper pilot."

Starbuck looked at him strangely. "You're joking, aren't you? I mean, it's a little hard to get in and out of a cockpit with only one good leg!"

"What do you mean?"

"Hey, Apollo, didn't you ever get a good look at her? She's a cripple! She runs around on crutches!"

Boomer shook his head. "An expectant mother and a cripple, flying a load of children. They must

really be desperate for pilots!"

* * * * *

Apollo was more determined than ever to find out who was flying that shuttle, but events seemed to conspire to get in his way. First, he had to make a report on the trip to the school ship. Then, when he went down to Life Centre to check on Ceres and ask her who the pilot was, he was told her pain was just a false alarm. They'd sent her home on the next shuttle.

Boxey didn't know who the pilot was. He said they hardly saw anyone but Ceres. He reported the next day that Ceres wasn't flying any more until she had her baby, and they'd shuffled all the pilots around.

Then there were a couple of alerts. Apollo'd almost forgotten about the matter until he spotted the woman boarding a shuttle one day. He hurried after her, but it took off before he got there. Then he saw the shuttle dispatcher standing nearby. The woman was a shuttle pilot; the dispatcher would know who she was.

"Who, the feisty gal with the bad leg? We call her the Sourpuss. Not to her face, of course. I think her name is Trista. She's a darn good pilot, but I have trouble finding co-pilots that can get along with her. Ceres was about the only one who could. Now that she's off duty, I got problems again. They made a good team. Ceres barely passed flight training, but she's so good with the kids, and the grouch is the best pilot we have, so she made up for it."

"Where was she going? Do you know?"

"She's off duty, I suppose she was heading home. I think she lives on the LADY OF ARGO."

The LADY OF ARGO was once a passenger liner, though not as luxurious as the RISING STAR, and a good deal older. Still, it converted rather nicely, with the staterooms and even the baggage compartments making adequate apartments. The food service facilities and dining rooms were able to feed the residents without too much crowding, and the promenade made a nice public park and playground.

Surprisingly, though, that was not where Boxey dragged Apollo once they landed. He had begged to come along to visit some of his school friends, and Apollo readily assented, realising how little time Boxey got to spend with other children. Being the only child on the GALACTICA could get rather lonely at times, he supposed. He would take Boxey to play with his friends, and then go look up this Trista. Boxey seemed to know where he was going, and hurried Apollo along, waiting impatiently for Muffet to catch up. But instead of heading for the public play area, he led them to one of the old lounges.

Apollo didn't know what to expect, but was surprised to find a children's care centre going full blast. In the centre of the room, half a dozen children about Boxey's age were playing a game with a homemade cloth ball, while a couple of toddlers napped on a blanket in a corner. A baby slept soundly amongst the din in a crib made out of a packing case. Near the back of the lounge, Apollo spotted an older woman, who sat rocking a redheaded boy of about four yahrens on her lap. The ball game came to an immediate halt as the kids fussed over Muffet, then resumed with the seven of them trying to keep the ball away from the daggit. Pleased that Boxey was having a good time, Apollo went over to talk to the woman. "Quite a lively bunch! Are they all yours?"

"In a way. Sometimes, I think I'm the adopted grandmother of every child on the ship!"

"Adopted?"

"When all my children and grandchildren were killed in the Destruction, my husband and I had no choice but to adopt a new batch. It's only in the figurative sense, though. This little one is the only child we've legally adopted so far."

Just then, the subject of their discussion decided to wiggle down from her lap. "Amma, I wannata go play."

"That's me," she laughed. "Grandma Alma. Or in his words, 'Gamma Amma.' Most of the parents of these children have jobs with the Fleet and have no one to look after their children while they're working. And here I was, a grandmother without grandchildren. It worked out so perfectly. The older ones help my husband on their days off from school. Blandon can't do heavy work any more, so he sorts the refuse on the ship and separates out the recyclable materials. The older kids think it's quite a thrill to be allowed to help him. And they keep an eye out for things we can use here." She indicated the homemade toys lying about.

"It gives the children a sense of stability, having someone that's always there. Many of them have only one parent or relative left. Jason there," she added, indicating the little redhaired boy who

was now playing by himself with a toy landram, "lost all of his family except an aunt. She's a pilot, and she felt that with the high risk of her job and the amount of time she's away, it would be better if Jason had someone else in his life he could count on. So we adopted him, and he lives here with 'Amma and Badda,' and his aunt is just someone who visits now and then. It hurts her, I can see it. But she feels it's in the best interests of the child. Though I wish we had other children closer to his age for him to play with."



Apollo was hearing her words, but his mind was on Boxey as he watched him playing happily with the other children. Finally, he spoke. "Maybe I've been wrong trying to raise Boxey by myself. He seems so happy here. And he's lost so much already. His home, his mother, even his pet."

Alma followed his gaze over to the children, who were now playing hide and seek with the daggit-droid as "it." "Is that why the mechanical animal? What a wonderful idea! The children love it so. But with the shortages of materials, I don't suppose there's much chance of getting another for the kids here?"

Apollo shook his head. "I really shouldn't have had that one made. But that was before we knew where we stood, and Boxey desperately needed a replacement for his daggit. You seem to be doing all right for yourselves, though." He indicated the room with its homemade toys scattered about.

"Jason's aunt made those for us. Blandon helps her find the materials. I think she's trying to spoil Jason, to make up for being away from him so much."

The ball the children had been playing with was pieced together from scraps of clothing, and probably stuffed with more of the same. Jason's toy landram was carved from a block of packing material, with slices of a large pole for wheels, and a strip of elastic material sewn together and stretched around them for the treads. There were "Vipers" folded out of packing foil, and a play cart with heavy equipment castors for wheels. They were obviously made out of scrap materials, but mar' with care and love. "His aunt must be a wonderful person. I'd like to meet her."

Just then, there was a commotion at the door, where the children were mobbing a woman who had just come in. She held what Apollo finally recognised as a crude hop-stick, made from some plastic piping, a crossbar, and probably a spring inside. She laughed as she teased them, holding the hop-stick over her head out of their reach until they promised to take turns. Finally, she let them have it, and they stampeded out to the hall to try it. As the children danced away from her, Apollo noticed that she leaned on a single crutch.

"Hi, Ann Trissa!" Jason ran over to give her a hug. As she bent down to hug him back, she noticed Apollo and stiffened, her face taking on a pained expression.

It was Trista.

Apollo hadn't recognised her at first; the civilian clothes and cheerful manner were so different from the grim shuttle pilot he'd flown with. But, upon seeing him, the grim manner returned, and she fled to the hall.

"Wait!" Apollo hurried after her. He caught up with her easily, and grasped her shoulder to turn her around. Then he stopped. She stood there glaring at him like a cornered wild animal ready to claw him apart.

"Why did you follow me here? I Leave me alone!"

"I didn't follow you," he lied. "I was bringing my son over here to play with his friends."

"Well, you brought him. Now, leave!"

Apollo stood his ground. "Why are you angry with me?"

"I'm not angry!"

"Then why are you shouting at me?"

"None of your business."

"It is when it's *me* you're shouting at."

"I don't want you here."

"Why? You don't even know me."

"You're a Warrior. That's all I need to know."

"What have you got against Warriors?"

"Nothing!" She paused and added quietly, "It just hurts, that's all."

Apollo considered for a moment. "What hurts?" he prodded softly.

"Seeing that uniform," she whispered.

Gently, he took her by the shoulders. "Why?"

"Because it reminds me of what I once was. And what I'm not any more."

"A Colonial Warrior?" She nodded. "Why? The leg?"

She nodded again. "It happened during the Destruction. I was stationed at a land base on Leon. We had no warning, just the Cylon ships flying over, firing at us. I think I was the only one to make it out to my Viper and launch. Of course, I was so outrageously outnumbered, it was no time at all before I was shot down. I managed to crashland my ship, and from there I don't remember much. I think some people pulled me from the wreckage and took me with them when we evacuated the planet. I woke in the Aide Station of this ship. They kept me alive and patched my leg together as best they could, but it was hardly a fully equipped Life Centre. I was out of danger, though, and the GALACTICA Life Centre had their hands full with the really serious cases, so I stayed where I was. I checked later on. The necessary components are classified 'Critical War Materials,' so prosthetic devices are only being made where a person's life depends on it, like a heart or a lung. I hardly qualify. So I guess I'm stuck with this." She raised her long skirt far enough to reveal a leg she couldn't straighten all the way, the lower part of it twisted inward at an impossible angle. "And they don't seem to want one-legged fighter pilots."

"Have you talked to Fighter Command?"

Her anger returned. "Fighter Command! I could talk to those frakin' frumps 'til I'm blue in the face! I even got as high as your Colonel, what's his name, Tigh? They said I couldn't get in and out of a ship fast enough, I couldn't take the G-forces, I was a liability. A liability! Me! One of the best pilots in the Fleet! A liability! I could fly rings around any of them any day! And all they want to know is how fast I can respond to Battle Stations. Or how fast I can bail out of a crash landing. *Hai!* If I ever crashed, I'd stay and go up with the ship. Dying as a Warrior sure beats living as a cripple."

"But we need your experience! There are so many other jobs you could fill!"

"Like what? Piloting a shuttle full of school kids back and forth? I don't call that flying. Any

idiot can pilot a shuttle; I flew a Viper. And I was good. I live to fly. And I don't call flying a shuttle living."



They had to flatten themselves against the wall as the herd of children thundered by. When Apollo turned back to her, she was clumping off down the hall. He let her go.

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It took several conferences with Doctor Salik, and almost half a sector of persuading, to get Colonel Tigh to agree, but in the end he said he would give Trista a chance to prove herself. He stressed that that's all it was -- a chance. But Apollo was grateful he'd gotten that much out of the Colonel. He could have gone directly to his father, but Adama had enough to worry about already, with the huge battlestar, not to mention a large fleet of civilian ships. And Apollo hated to use his position as the Commander's son unless he absolutely had to. Besides, Colonel Tigh was more directly in charge of the fighter pilots, so it was better to get his approval.

The other half of the sector was taken up with the operation and Trista's recovery from it. Doctor Salik said her leg wasn't as bad as it looked. Granted, a prosthetic leg would be necessary to regain full movement, and that was out of the question with the shortage of materials. But she could have nearly full movement by rebuilding what was left of her own leg. She still had adequate circulation, and her hip and foot were relatively undamaged. So Salik replaced both of the main bones and her knee. Her ankle had to be fused solid so she could stand on it without collapsing, because there was almost nothing usable left of her leg muscles. The knee joint was made so if she put her weight on it when it was straight, the joint would lock, but her weight on it bent would bend it further.

Trista said learning to walk on it wasn't hard; it was much like using her crutch. Running was something else. She had some spectacular falls before she learned to make sure the leg was straight before she landed on it. She finally reverted to a step-and-skip, step-and-skip gait that she'd used with her crutch. She had surprisingly little trouble keeping up with anyone. It was surprising, that is, to everyone but Trista. Her reaction was a smug, "I told you so."

Her flight test was extremely thorough. She passed the simulator with almost contemptuous ease. In an actual Viper, it was as if she'd never been away from it. Her reflexes were excellent, and her physical reaction to the high G-forces of the manoeuvres was better than normal. Probably, Doctor Salik said, because sudden high gravity causes the blood to pool in the lower part of the body, causing the brain to black out for lack of oxygen. Having less circulation in her leg meant less area for the blood to pool in, thus giving her a higher G-force tolerance. So what was a disadvantage on the ground was actually an advantage as a pilot.

Colonel Tigh was more interested in Trista's performance as a fighter pilot, and ran her through every drill he could think of. Finally, he grudgingly admitted she was as good as any pilot they had.

When it was announced that Trista would be reinstated as a Colonial Warrior at her former rank, Apollo, Starbuck, Boomer, Sheba, and Cassiopeia gathered in the Officers' Club to celebrate. It was to be a surprise, and Trista was surprised indeed. The group started applauding at her entrance, and she immediately stopped. She didn't say a thing, but she turned quite red.

Finally, Apollo called to her, "Well, don't just stand there! Come join the celebration!"

Carefully, with almost military dignity, Trista strode across the club to their table. Cassiopeia held her breath all the way, remembering some of the falls Trista'd had learning to walk again in Life Centre, but Trista easily crossed the length of the club without incident.



When she was seated, Apollo raised his glass in a toast. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Lieutenant Trista -- one very determined pilot!"

When the laughter died down, Boomer poked Starbuck in the ribs. "Hey, buddy, close your mouth! And quit staring! It isn't polite."

"But she's so different! Last time I saw her, she was yelling at a bunch of kids and just about shoving them on a shuttle. She sounded like Colonel Tigh at a bad inspection. And look at her now. She's fit to bust with happiness!"

Trista looked down at the table. "I never wanted to be anything but a pilot. And I always strived to be one of the best. My nephew was the only bright spot in my life since my crash. But now I've got my chance back. And I couldn't be happier."

Sheba looked sideways at Apollo. "And is she? One of the best?"

Before he could answer, Starbuck cut in. "Well, that all depends on whether she can keep up with me!" he teased.

Apollo grinned at him. "I wouldn't bet any cubits on it, Starbuck. She might just surprise you."

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She surprised them, all right. In the sector that followed, she flew her missions with the same grim determination with which she'd landed the malfunctioning shuttle -- also with the manner of someone who'd gotten a second lease on life. She got as much as she could out of every flight, and gave as much as she could as well.

She was constantly cheerful. But there was always one subject that would bring back the angry Trista Apollo had first met -- children.

On a number of alerts, she seemed almost protective of him, and inversely unmindful of her own safety. Finally, Apollo had enough. He ordered her to report immediately after landing. "Just what were you trying to do out there, Lieutenant? Defeat the Cylons single-handedly? A squadron is a team. Or weren't you ever taught teamwork? Or discipline? Granted, it takes a while to integrate yourself with the habits of an established unit, but you've had more than enough time to learn to work with us, not against us! How can we attack effectively if I never know where you'll be? Battles are won by pilots working together, not by 'glory-grabbers'!"

"I wasn't 'glory-grabbing'!"

"Then what were you doing? Trying to get yourself killed?"

"I was trying to keep you from getting killed!" He could see the anger building in her until she couldn't hold back. The lecture she let forth had apparently been a long time in coming. "What the frak were you doing, flying like that? Keep it up, and you'll get yourself blasted -- but good! Then where will Boxey be? Left alone again! How much more can the child take?"

Apollo was startled by the sudden change of subject. "What's Boxey got to do with this?"

"Everything! The whole idea of this fleet is to keep the human race alive, to create a continuance for the next generation! And we have to give them something solid to anchor their lives to! Our home worlds are gone; our society is changing; the only stable thing left to cling to is a family. And when that family is one person with a high-risk job, he's got a lot to lose!"

Apollo was grasping at anything he could to regain control of the situation. "And what about you? You've got a child, too!"

"Not any more, I don't! I took care of that! Even a shuttle pilot can get killed. Jason seemed attracted to Sire and Siress Blandon, so I encouraged it. I suggested they adopt him, then I backed out. He's attached to them now, not me. If I get killed, it won't be much of a loss. Apollo, I know it hurts. Believe me, I know! But often the best thing you can do for someone you love is to let go! For Boxey's sake, please find him a foster home. Now, while he's still young enough to adapt!"

This was getting out of hand. "My private life is none of your concern, Lieutenant. The subject of discussion is discipline in battle, and your lack of it! So, for the next sector, you will report to the training ship, where you will instruct the cadets in flight discipline. Maybe then you'll learn some yourself. Dismissed!"

Her words stayed with him after she left, though. It brought back the question he'd asked ever since Serina died. Was he really right in trying to raise the child alone? Was he being selfish, keeping the boy with him because Boxey was all he had left of Serina? Would Boxey be happier with two parents and other children, or was he too attached to Apollo?

Apollo took a good look at Trista's arrangement. The boy was happy and well cared for, and would grow up surrounded by a nice stable "family." He remembered his own childhood and regretted that Boxey had no siblings.

And was a busy Commander enough of a grandparent? Boxey certainly seemed happy. But maybe he loved Apollo so much that he wanted him to think he was happy, even when he wasn't. He'd certainly been eager enough to go play with his friends that day.

Finally, Apollo approached Boxey on the subject. "Don't you get kind of lonely here sometimes? There's no one here but grownups, and I'm always so busy. Wouldn't you rather have someone that's always there, like maybe some grandparents, and other kids to play with?"

Sudden panic. "You're not leaving me, are you?"

"No! No, of course not! But I thought you might get kind of lonely by yourself here. Wouldn't you like to live somewhere else? Like maybe the LADY OF ARG0?"

"Would you live there, too?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm awfully busy being a squadron leader. I'd have to spend most of my time on the GALACTICA. But you'd have so many other people there to keep you company..."

"I wanna stay with you."

The boy looked at him in a way Apollo found hard to resist. "Boxey, I'm a pilot. You know that. You also know pilots have to fly some really dangerous missions. Some day, I might not come back. And then you'd be all alone."

"No, I wouldn't! I got Muffet! An' Granpa, an' Starbuck, an' Boomer, an' Athena, an' Cassiopeia, an' Sheba..."

Apollo hugged Boxey to him. Trista may have had to create a surrogate family for Jason, but Boxey had found his own. It worked fine for Trista, but Apollo didn't need to worry.

"But, Dad, could I go over there more often? It does get a little lonely here, when you're all so busy."

Apparently Trista felt she had spoken her piece, because she never brought the subject up again. And she did back off from her close watch of Apollo during battles. But she was no more careful of her own safety.

Apollo, Starbuck, Cassiopeia, and Sheba gathered for a quiet evening on the RISING STAR, and the conversation (inevitably) turned to the squadron and patrols -- with Starbuck (as usual) either bragging or griping.

Just now he was griping. "I mean, it's almost like she was askin' to get killed! After she fought so hard to get her pilot's position back, it just doesn't make sense!"

Cassiopeia had listened quietly to the discussion of Trista's battle technique, but now she spoke. "I'm not so sure. I think I'm beginning to see her side of it. My, ah, training was in working with people psychologically as well as physically. I got to know her fairly well when she was in Life Centre. She can't tolerate being grounded; she has to fly, but she's developed an 'all or nothing' attitude about it. With your shield, or on it. The way I see it, she's so scared of being crippled again, she fights in such a way that she will either return unscathed or be killed in battle."

Starbuck almost choked on his drink. "A death wish? But, that's crazy!"

"No, not a death wish. She doesn't want to die any more than you do. But she feels that if by chance she is hit, she would rather be killed outright than risk being permanently grounded by an injury."

Sheba looked thoughtful. "You know, you really have to admire her. If she's so scared of being crippled again, she could hang back, fight a strictly defensive battle, and let the other pilots take the offensive against the Cylons. Yet she's as much a part of this squadron as anyone, and she fights like it. She takes on her share, and more. She's really incredible."

Starbuck wasn't so sure. "All right, so she's a terrific pilot, and a credit to the team. The way she goes at it, she isn't going to last long. Granted, it's a high-risk job, but she'll never make retirement the way she's going. Hasn't anyone ever told her, her career doesn't have to end with a funeral? She must have somethin' to live for!"

Apollo couldn't help remembering Jason and the life Trista had so carefully planned for him. "She's got as much to live for as any of us. But she's a very practical realist, who knows the odds and allows for them. All she wanted was a chance to be a good pilot, and she knows it can't last forever." On this depressing note, another round of drinks arrived, and the subject was quickly changed.

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Thinking back over Trista's time with the squadron, Apollo realised her seemingly daring fighting style wasn't "glory-grabbing" so much as sticking her neck out for her team-mates.

But she stuck hers out a little farther than the rest, and the inevitable finally happened.

Boomer was caught in a Cylon pinwheel, and Apollo went to help him. Neither of them saw the additional Cylon ships bearing down on them. Trista did. But she was in the wrong place to fire on them without possibly hitting Apollo or Boomer. So, instead, she blocked the Cylon fire with her own ship.

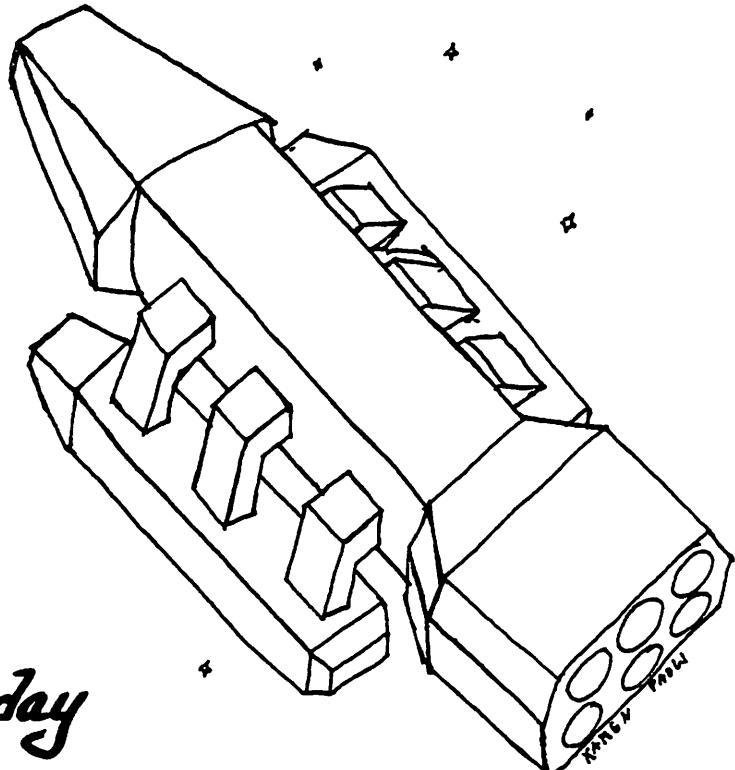
Apollo sat alone in his quarters, replaying that scene in his head. Soon, he would have to go over to the LADY OF ARGO to find Sire and Siress Blandon and tell Jason that his aunt wouldn't be visiting him any more. Not that he'd miss her much. But that's what she'd intended.

Boxey came bouncing in from school. "Hey, Dad! Guess what? Ceres was waiting for us when we came down to get on the shuttles today. She came to show us her new baby. It's a girl, and she named her Trista, after Jason's Aunt Trista. She says Trista's a great pilot. Is she really?"

"She was one of the best, Boxey. One of the best."

And in the
East, there
shone a
star...

May you find
peace and
goodwill
this holiday
season



**SUZY
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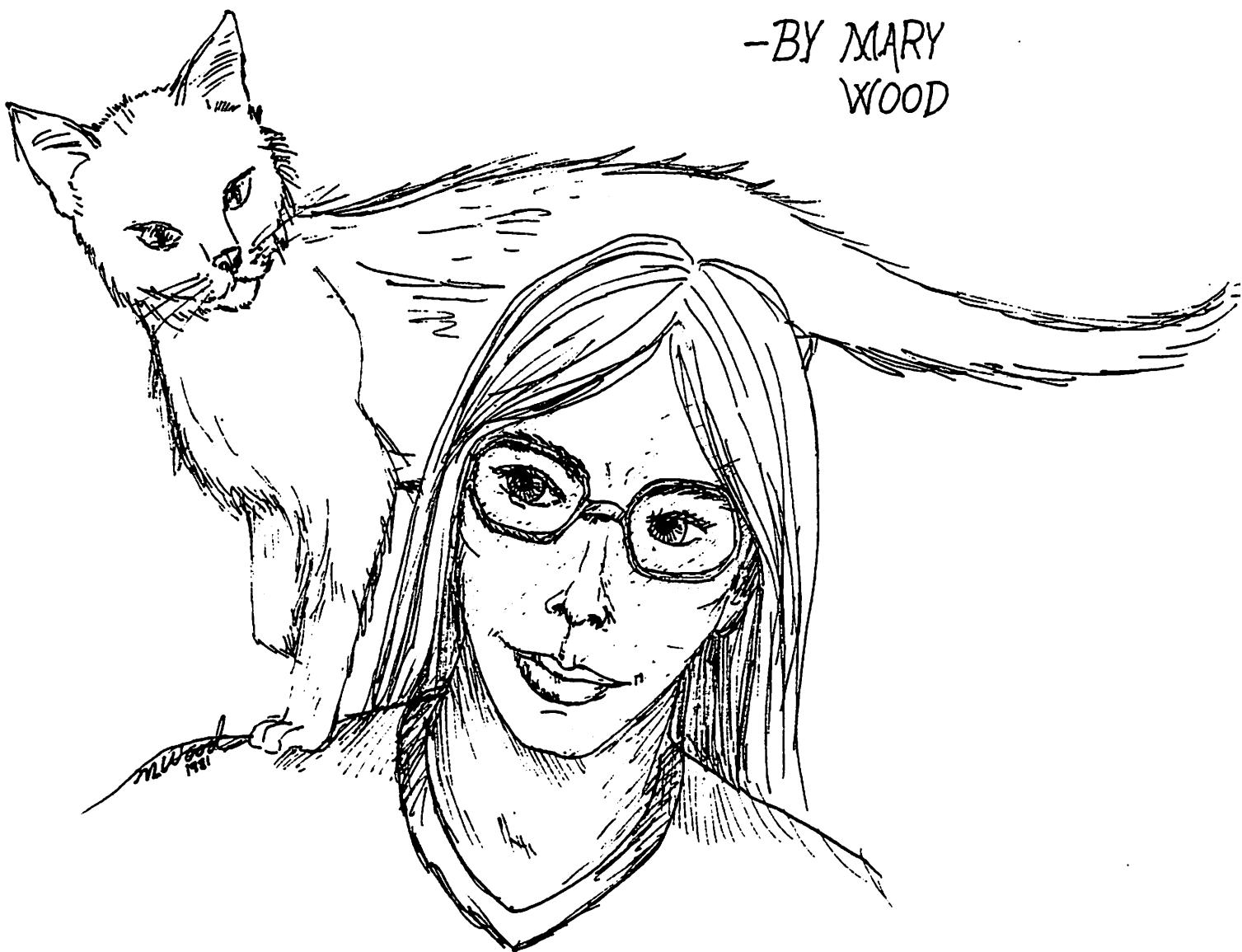
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IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

-BY MARY
WOOD



"It's All in the Name"

(By Mary Wood)

Avarr walked at a reasonably fast pace through the utility passage. Why anyone would want to live in this remote part of the OSIRIS... Still, he had been told the historian was a little eccentric. The handrail shifted to his left, and he switched the information disc he carried to his other hand, glancing at it as he did so. "Biological Aspects of Dry Preservation." Sounded like something that Tanis fellow would like, not his commander, even if the archaeological dig was such a topic these days. "By Hathsephut..."

"Felgercarb!" he muttered, as a low pipe unexpectedly hit his head. He rubbed the sore spot; they could at least pad those things! Not far ahead was the hatch to the old observation tower that was Miss Davenport's quarters. He opened it and climbed the curved metal stairway. There were pipes up and down the shaft, with sealed storage pods wedged between them. He wondered if they all belonged to Miss Davenport.

"Miss" Davenport, mind you. Everyone else used simple, one-word names -- but not the historian. Oh, no. Some title out of antiquity. An old formality long out of use. Maybe it was because of her age. He'd been told she'd been with the OSIRIS since the "beginning" -- what beginning wasn't specified. She must be ancient.

He got to the top of the stairway, slightly winded, and looked behind him. Still, anyone who could get up those stairs twice a day couldn't be too decrepit...

When there was no response to his first knock, he leaned toward the door and listened. Amongst the creak of metal joinings, he could hear a wavering sung melody with unintelligible words. He rapped again, louder. Hesitantly, he tried the door, found it unsealed, and pushed it ajar. "Miss Davenport?" The song stopped, but there was still no reply. "Ensign Avarr, ma'am, I have a disc..."

A thud, and a dull clatter. "Certainly. Come in, I'll be right with you."

He ducked under a low-hanging ledge over the door and was immediately captivated by the expanse of star-sprayed void over his head. The observation tower, of course! Like the celestial domes! It was incredible -- as if there was nothing between him and the stars.

"Lovely, isn't it?" a voice said under his chin. He looked down, somewhat abashed, to regard his hostess.

"Uh-huh." Her appearance surprised him too much for any more adept response. In the first place, she wasn't all that old -- maybe forty, tops -- and she was short. Medium brown hair, very straight and long, and slightly tilted blue eyes didn't seem to quite go with her bronze skin and high cheekbones. The unsettling mixture of racial types obviously included one of the early Colonial races, but Avarr would not have called her pretty.

"Uh, this disc. My commander borrowed it, Major Arcus." He paused awkwardly. "It's overdue." He admitted the last in a quieter tone. Just about everyone on board knew about Miss Davenport's insistence that historical materials had a strict time regulation. She'd even been known to threaten charging credits for late items.

When she didn't reprimand him as he expected, Avarr went on hastily. "He said something about another one, on 'Monographs,' I think."

She frowned. "Circ! I forgot about that! Don't know where I put it. Never mind, it's here somewhere." She looked around doubtfully. "I'll find it. Sit down."

The invitation was easier made than accomplished. Looking around, Avarr soon noticed what it was that made people regard Miss Davenport as a little strange. Things. Books. It was almost too passive a word. The small room was cluttered with objects, but the most remarkable were the books. They were piled high -- old, bound volumes as impractical and outdated as the title "Miss." Their use had been virtually abandoned at least two generations ago. The only more-or-less open space in the room was the bed by the door -- if you could call three quarreling bastards uncluttered. In the area filled by her relatively few books, an entire basic humanities collection could be contained on standard micro-discs.

He finally spied a clear chair at what must have served as her work desk, but before he could head that way, he was pounced on from behind and let out a yelp of surprise. Miss Davenport popped out from behind an overcrowded shelf.

"Brit! How many times must I tell you not to do that?" She stopped, as if listening. "Well, it's not 'fun' for the person you jump on!"

Avarr glanced dumbfounded from the golden-green eyes of the white bast to Miss Davenport's reproachful frown. She thought the bast could reply? Odd woman...

The creature meowed. "Off there! Behave yourself!" the historian went on. The bast cried again and leapt onto the bed, suddenly deciding to thoroughly clean and groom one of the grey-and-white bastlings. Avarr kept an eye on both as he made his way to the desk.

"I'm sorry," Miss Davenport said. "Brit is far too curious. May I get you something? A drink, perhaps? This may take a bit."

"I guess so. I'm not on duty, or anything." In all honesty, he felt he could use one. But if he expected something cool and distilled, he was wrong.

The woman heated some water until it steamed, then threw in some brown, crumbly stuff and let it sit while she watched her chronometer. Then she poured the whole mess through a strainer into a mug. When she served Avarr the doubtful concoction, he sniffed it cautiously, decided he wasn't ready to risk it yet, and set the mug down. Miss Davenport returned to her search.

He looked around again, mindful of the silence between them, and sought some topic of conversation. "Why do you have all these books?" he asked finally.

Her voice came from somewhere in the depths of her collection. "I collect them, repair them -- read them, too."

"But, why?"

"Not sure. In the blood, I guess. Most of them came to me from my grandfather, and through my father. There's something about handling them... It's not as impersonal as a disc or crystal in a reader."

"But they decay, crumble, the writing fades, and the information is lost."

"All these books have been translated onto other forms of information storage, and into the computer's circuits. Except a few that would not be considered necessary."

"Then why keep them?" He'd finally determined that the hot liquid wouldn't hurt him, and reached for it. His hand encountered Brit's furry nose as she, too, investigated the beverage. She sniffed it, drew back with the closest he'd seen to distaste on her face, and systematically pawed the table all around it, as if she could bury it. Avarr reconsidered the wisdom of trying it.

"Britannica!" The bast jumped, Avarr jumped, and the drink almost toppled and spilled. "Honestly, you're impossible tonight!"

The Ensign pretended the whole embarrassing incident hadn't occurred. "Britannica?"

"That's her name -- one of them, anyway. She has five." She saw his disbelief and smiled self-consciously. "Names fascinate me, and there are so many lovely ones, I hate not to use several."

"How do you remember them all? Britan... Brit's names?"

"I don't. I have a terrible memory, so I have called all my basts 'Britannica' as a first name. Less troublesome."

"All? How many have you had?"

"This is Britannica III."

Avarr put his head in his hands briefly. Was there something beyond "eccentric?" Books, names... Best to humour her. "Are all the little ones named 'Britannica,' too?"

"Don't be silly. Why give them all the same name? How would I tell them apart?"

He couldn't answer that. "Right. What do you call them -- if anything?"

"Macro, Micro, and Pro."

He gave up on the conversation.

"Here it is!" she announced suddenly. He was glad to hear it. She came triumphantly from a cupboard under the wash basin and saw the mug held gingerly in his hand. "You haven't drunk your tea."

"Is that what it is?" He put it down and stood up. "I guess I'd better go."

Miss Davenport shrugged and proffered the disc. "Be sure Major Arcus returns this one on time. If we weren't such old friends..."

He couldn't resist one more question. "If you're as fond of names as you say, why is it you don't use your own?"

"For good and sound reasons. Reprehensible nicknames, for one. And your commander is one of the worst offenders. Good evening, Ensign."

He was gently ushered out the door before he could press the issue. Reprehensible nicknames? Frak!

As he retraced the route by which he'd come, he concluded that the historian was downright erratic. He wondered how anyone could understand her well enough to become friends, yet Major Arcus apparently had. Old friends? He'd had some pleasant discussions with Arcus about the Major's varied past but didn't recall that the historian had ever come up.

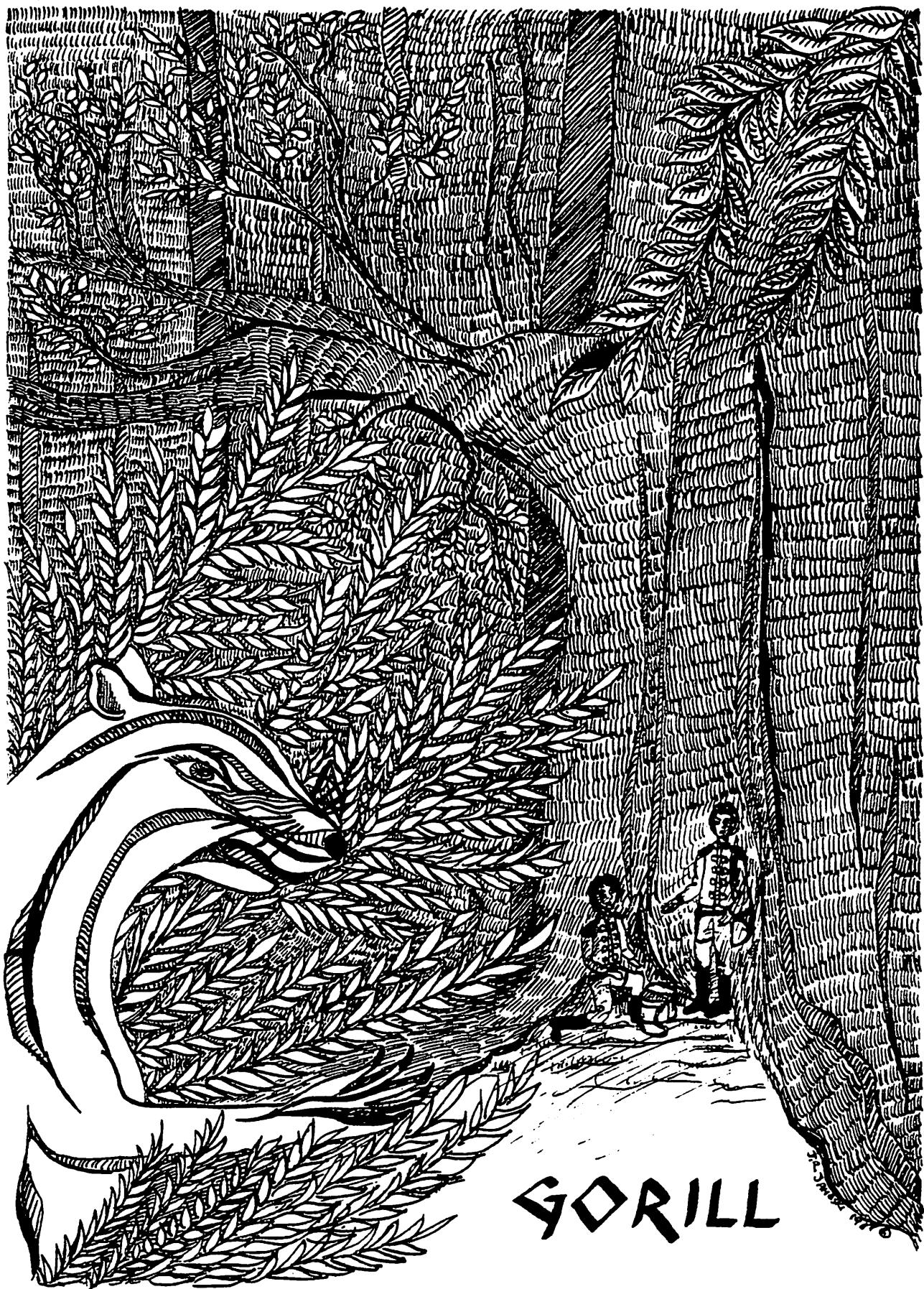
Absently, he gazed at the thing in his hand. "Monographs as Documents of Cultural History" -- what in the Void were monographs? -- "by Hathsephut Davenport..."

A smile grew on his lips. Her father? No, somehow, he knew the conglomeration of letters was a feminine name. He attempted to pronounce it aloud, using what little he remembered from his brush with the old language. "Haht-see..."

The smile became a chuckle, then a laugh. Hotsy!

Sure, Arcus had mentioned a "Hotsy" several times in his reminiscing. Some wild lady who'd shared some of his stranger adventures. Somehow, Avarr had gotten a completely different image of her...





"Gorill"

(By J. R. Janoski)

Gorill woke as dawn came. He stretched lazily. It was good to be warm again. The cold season had been long and hard. They had lost several of their tribe, and that always made Gorill sad. But now was the season of life; the trees were beginning to bear fruit, and the roots were fat and juicy.

Gorill looked up at the tree. He wished there was some way to pick the best fruits. The tribe members were too large; their weight broke the limbs. The young could be used, but he was reluctant to encourage them. They lost several young to climbing accidents every warm season -- the tribe could not climb trees and hold on well.

Corell stirred. Gorill gazed at her with fondness. She was a good mate. He had been with her now for five full turns of the seasons, and she had given him young each warm season. She was again heavy with her soon-to-be-born young.

His tribe was the largest of their kind. It now numbered seventy, and would grow again this season.

Gorill stretched again. The light of the sun felt good. He roused two young males and sent them to search for food for the tribe to harvest. Their gatherings had been good, but Gorill was already concerned with gathering for the future. The old ones said this next cold season would again be early and long.

Gorill's forward scouts reported; there was no sign of their enemy. Gorill knew the Vasks would not begin to prey on the tribe until the young were born. Adults of the tribe could repel the attack of a pack of Vasks. At least, the healthy members could, although the Vasks would leave wounds as they slashed with their sharp teeth and claws.

Gorill felt sadness again as he remembered his own lost young of the last warm season. Corell had mourned long.

Suddenly, Gorill looked up at the sky. He had never heard such sounds before! Then all the tribe awoke and gazed fearfully at the sky. It was as the thunder, but there were no clouds.

Gorill climbed to the top of the high rock above their caves. He had never seen such large birds before. He watched as they came to rest. Then he called his oldest son, Intor, and they went together to find where the birds had come to rest. These birds were so big, they could perhaps carry off even adult members of the tribe.

Gorill wished to spy on them, to learn whether the birds were to be feared.

It took Gorill and Intor a long time to reach the place where the birds rested. They heard noises and sounds they did not recognise. They hid carefully and watched quietly.

Two strange creatures came into their view. Gorill had never seen such creatures before in his life. They were as small as the tribe's young, and they had strange coverings on their bodies. They were gathering just a few roots and leaves, and even ground. Gorill watched as one climbed a tree to gather some fruit.

Gorill and Intor marvelled at the lightness of the creatures' skin. They had hair only on their heads -- one was dark-haired; the other had hair like the sun.

Gorill was fascinated. He signed to Intor to wait while he followed the creatures. He wanted to find where they came from. He followed them to a clearing.

The big birds were waiting for the creatures!

Gorill's eyes opened wide in surprise and amazement. He watched with disbelief as the creatures climbed into the birds' mouths. The mouths closed about the creatures, and then the birds flew away.

Gorill ran into the clearing and looked up into the sky. He was not sure he could believe his own eyes!

Gorill left Intor to watch for the return of the birds. He was sure they would return, and he wanted to observe. Perhaps they could arrange to trade roots for fruits. And perhaps they could be allies. The creatures would certainly need protection when away from their birds.

The creatures returned as Gorill expected, and he personally observed them for several days. There were many creatures, and they brought a flying turtle and used its shell to carry away what they gathered.

Gorill wondered how many creatures there were, and where they lived.

It seemed the dark-haired one Gorill first saw was the tribe leader. This one often took walks alone. Gorill decided to approach this creature when next he walked far from the creatures' camp. Gorill was also concerned for the dark-haired one's safety. He knew two packs of Vasks were near. These creatures did not know of Vasks, and they were as frail and unprotected as the tribe's young.

The next dawning, Gorill watched as the dark-haired one again left the creatures' camp. Gorill followed quietly. Then he stopped and sniffed.

Vasks!

Gorill looked at the creature; the creature did not seem to sense the danger. Gorill gave his hunting cry. The creature turned, but could not see him.

The creature had only a fat stick in his hands.

Gorill thought the birds did not provide good protection for their creatures. He sniffed again. The Vasks were here!

Suddenly, a Vask leapt from the foliage and stood growling at the creature. The creature turned toward the Vask and started backing away slowly. Another Vask came out of the foliage behind the creature and slashed at his legs.

The creature turned. Fire came from his stick, and the Vask fell. The creature turned back to face the first Vask, and it, too, fell to the stick's fire.

Gorill thought better of the birds' protection for their creatures.

Suddenly, the Vask pack came out of hiding, and over thirty Vasks circled the creature. Gorill gave his cry of challenge, and the pack slowed its advance. The creature began to use his stick, and the Vasks fell one by one.

Then two Vasks leapt forward and back, then two more. Gorill saw that the creature was injured.

There were too many Vasks!

Gorill came roaring out of his cover and started throwing the Vasks away from the creature. The creature glanced at Gorill, then turned to continue his own fight against the Vasks. The Vasks retreated; Gorill heard their leader call them together.

The creature turned to look again at Gorill and made sounds he couldn't understand. Gorill noticed the creature's eyes were the colour of the trees -- he had never before seen such a thing.

Gorill sat to show he was a friend. The creature seemed to understand, and put away his fire stick. Then Gorill nodded and gave his "friend" sound.

The creature gazed at him for a few moments, nodded, and also sat, trying to tend his wounds. Gorill saw that the creature bled, but did not know how to aid him.

The Vask leader howled in the distance, and Gorill tried to tell the creature that they must leave because the Vasks would soon return. He stood and walked a few steps down the path toward the creatures' camp. The creature stood and followed him.

Gorill kept leading, and the creature followed, but moved slowly. He fell, and Gorill waited patiently until the creature rose and moved again, following him. Gorill could see that the creature was weakening rapidly. Then the creature fell again and did not rise.

Gorill looked at the creature with concern. He could not leave him to go for the other creatures. The Vasks were still following. He gently picked up the creature and continued down the path, carrying the creature as he would carry one of his own young.



After many moments, the creature stirred in his arms. Gorill stroked the creature as he would stroke one of his young, to quiet them when they were frightened. The creature looked into his eyes and relaxed in his arms.

Gorill walked into the creatures' camp. The other creatures looked at him with fear in their eyes and took out their fire sticks. Gorill sat to show he was a friend. Then he gently laid the dark-haired one on the ground. The dark-haired one spoke to the other creatures.

The others looked up at Gorill. He saw the fear leave their eyes. They carried the dark-haired one to the turtle, and it flew away.

Gorill sat quietly, observing their activities. One of the creatures came to him and offered him some of the fruit they had gathered. He took it and ate it, and they seemed pleased.

Gorill came each day to the creatures' camp and brought roots to them, and they gave him fruit. One day, he decided it was safe to bring the others of his tribe. They came and brought baskets with many roots. The creatures gave back the baskets -- filled with fruits.

Gorill was well pleased. He liked these creatures. He saw that they learned quickly. They were now placing guards around their camp, and no one went into the forest alone.

Then one day Gorill was pleased to see one of the birds come and bring back his dark-haired friend. He picked up the dark-haired one as he approached. This was to show his pleasure at seeing his friend again. But the other creatures all took out their fire sticks. Gorill quickly and gently put the dark-haired one back down.

Then the dark-haired one spoke to the others, and the fire sticks were put away.

Gorill growled at them in irritation. They should have known he would not hurt this one -- they were friends. The dark-haired one spoke softly to Gorill and patted Gorill's knee. Gorill relaxed, and the dark-haired one tried to speak to him, but Gorill could not understand.

Then the dark-haired one used his hands to try to speak to Gorill, and Gorill thought he understood, and made his tribe's sign for "friend."

In the days that followed, Gorill learned to talk to the creatures. He was sad to learn they would soon leave. He could not understand where they lived. The dark-haired one said they lived in the sky, but Gorill knew this to be impossible. He would have to think long on this.

The tribe would miss the fruits.

Then the dark-haired one brought a very long stick with a small basket at one end. He asked Gorill to follow him. He led Gorill to one of the fruit trees and showed him how to use the stick. He then gave the stick to Gorill, and Gorill tried it.

Gorill roared his pleasure. He could pick the fruit!

The creature's eyes grew wide at Gorill's roar, and the other creatures came running with their fire sticks. Then the dark-haired one laughed and sent them away. He shook his head at Gorill and covered his ears. Gorill was amused -- these creatures were so frail!

But the sticks were a wonderful gift, and Gorill was well pleased.

Then the dark-haired one told Gorill they were leaving and would not return. Gorill looked at his new friend with sadness. He did not want to believe his words. He asked if they would not come again for fruit in the warm season.

The dark-haired one said no, they would not come again. He wished Gorill and his tribe good harvests.

Gorill told his friend to stay safe and multiply. Then he watched as the dark-haired one entered his bird and left.

Gorill watched the sky for a long time, trying to think where these creatures lived.

He came each day to the clearing, but the creatures did not return, and Gorill's heart was sad.

The story of the creatures who came to visit and left the fruit sticks became as a legend to the tribe. At the beginning of each warm season, it became a tradition to wait in the clearing -- but the creatures did not come again in Gorill's lifetime.

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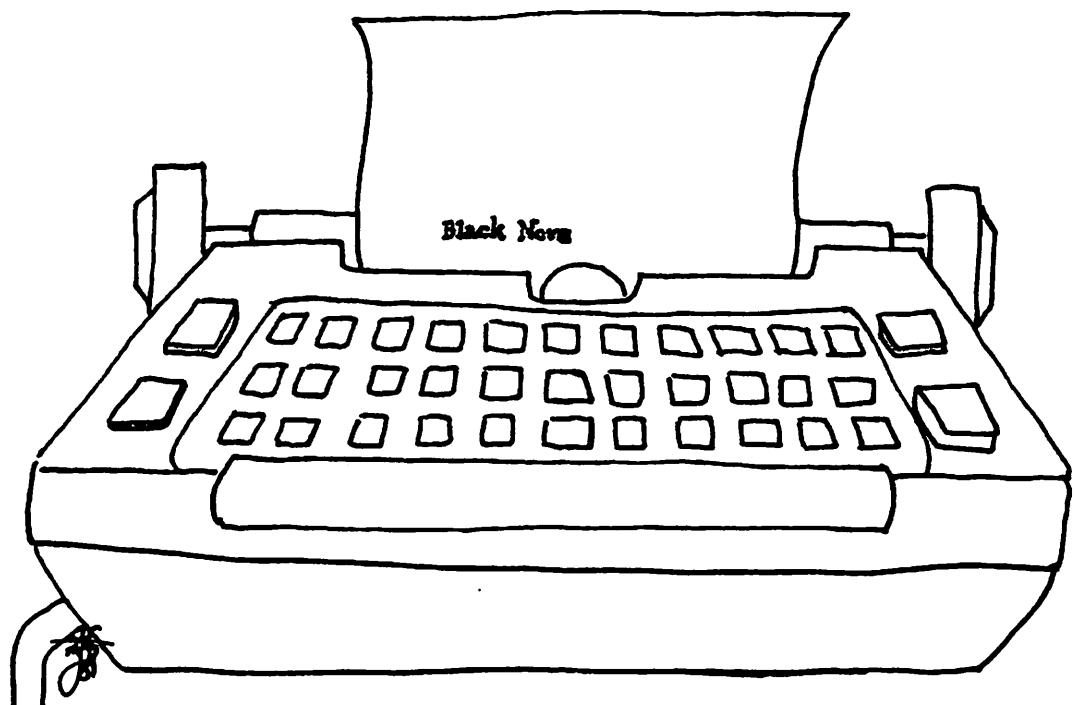
G. P. Feb. 10 '81

Send all questions, comments, requests, and registrations to: CAPRICON, c/o Charles Bestler, 101 W. Harrison, Oak Park, IL 60304.

Typewriter Warming...

On a grand and glorious day -- well, night, if you must know -- in January of 1981, a new member joined the staff of "Purple and Orange?" A marvel of the electronic age, "Black Nova" is a variable-pitch, self-correcting Remington Rand element typewriter, known formally as an RR-101. On the night of the formal typewriter-warming, "Black Nova," with the help of sundry friends and members of the "Purple and Orange?" staff, produced the following story.

We must point out that "Black Nova" and the writers are responsible for every letter, every comma -- and every goof -- on the following pages. This story is completely unedited and is appearing exactly as typed on that last night of the month. If you find it hard to follow -- or even just hard to decypher -- remember "Black Nova's" youth -- and the state of the writers, who took turns at the keyboard!



Now in the west the slender moon lies low.
And now Orion glimmers through the trees
Covering the earth with even pace and slow
And now the stately moving . . . Pleiades
In that soft infinite darkness overhead
Hang jewel-wise from a silver thread.

"Welcome-in-the-village," said the Cylon, opening the Gates of Kiro and admitting the three travelers.

"Oh, dear," the first traveler said. "It appears the Tardis malfunctioned again." The second man, known only as H. G., nodded in agreement. Commander Adama was confused.

"Where in the Lands of Xanth are we?"

"Hush," the Doctor whispered. They entered a vast, yellow-paved square. In the distance, three massive beasts slouched in a gilded corral. They wore shiny green rainments.

"Your-handsome-what-i-amait," the Cylon droned. A second robot wheeled up and introduced itself.

"Hello, my name is Robbie. I will be your guide. Please follow me." A brown fire lizard settled on Robbie's shoulder.

"What are they doing to us?" Adama insisted.

"It appears they're taking us for a ride," H. G. answered. "And the handsome-what-i-amait are wearing Klingon dress glitz. It must be a native festival."

"Indeed," Robbie answered. "The sandworms are moulting. It is a time of great joy and also great trepidation. Please hurry."

The four mismatched protagonists approached the corral, dimly lit by the light of twin faraway suns, two lunar eclipses, a bright red star, the nearest arm of the spiral galaxy, and the accretion disk of the neighborhood black hole. The Doctor hooked his scarf around the neck (neck?) of the first bandersnatch and swung onto its back (back?). H. G. clambered upon the second beast, and Adama, with much protestation, was hoisted by a Vertical Lift Device and planted on the last bandersnatch.

"Where do we go?" the Doctor asked his guide.

"Wherever you wish, master," answered the bandersnatch, almost throwing its rider. "I wasn't asking you," the Doctor scolded.

"I take you now to a world which is not our own," Robbie answered, leading the animals out of their corral and onto the road. "Please do not attempt to adjust your bandersnatch."

They proceeded into the East, slouching slowly into the sunset. This struck H. G. as being a bit peculiar, but he refrained from comment lest he alarm the others.

Presently, the well-beaten trail led divided. The Doctor observed three strange beasts obviously not bandersnatches approaching.

"Ohh, we must be hurrying along." said Robbie.

"Oh no, I'd like to see what they are." said the Doctor.

"But it's not allowed." protested Robbie..

He was too late, the three Banfas had already arrived.

The rakish blond riding the lead beast waved a small green cigar at the three travelers. "Hi Commander, you'll love the trip."

"How nice of you to reassure me Starbuck." Adama said faintly.

The second rider sidled up to Starbuck's Banfa and leaning over to whisper in his ear said. "I want him Starbuck, give him to me."

"Want who ." Starbuck said impatiently.

"The white-haired one of course, the one you called Adama". Princess Aura said pertinaciously.

"Well, you can't have him the third figure said as they rode up to join the

group.

A short distance behind the bantha, came several small figures. Extraordinarily short, they spoke a language in high pitched gibberish. A spokesman came forward, looking rather more impressively dressed than the others. In a voice resembling Standard he asked Adama, "Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?" He ~~wanted~~^{did} not to respond, and the little person went on his way singing something about a gold road. Starbuck's eyes glinted with mercenary greed and he followed at a discreet distance.

The third bantha pulled in beside Adama's bandersnatch.

"Do you know where Earth is, Sir?"

"Why do you want to know about Earth?" Adama replied. "Do you too seek the Glory road?"

"No. I was on Earth, or rather two Earths. I was frozen and came back. But this year they sent us out on a great mission and I'm lost again..." The man turned his breast away muttering. "Why couldn't they have left me on Earth with Zweky and Dr. Zuer..."

Adama shook his head after the fading bantha, then headed his bandersnatchi into the looming web draped tunnel.

From far off in the distance, they heard the strange little voices humming, in the strains of their little tuba orchestra, "we're off to see the Lizard, the wonderful Lizard of odds". With the last term, the vanishing figure of Starbuck seemed to perk up. Odds, he could understand. Lizards he could cope with. But those large pyramids in the distance worried him slightly.

Deep into the tunnel they journeyed. Strange images occupied the distances, dimly in a pool of wan yellow light, Adama saw a cryptic series of glyphs that seemed to read "CHICAGO AND NEVERSEY, IN ONLY." Cryptic symbols, thought Adama to himself. What was a CHICAGO, and how diversely were they divided? And obviously IN was the way to go. The migrating bandersnatchi continued to wend their galumphing ways past the oblong glass walled boxes lining the metal-railed pathways.

"We must be very quiet now," solemnly intoned Robbie, "We are now passing the dread lair of the creature known only as "Evanston".

"Ah, Evanston", quoth the Doctor (who had never really properly inferred).

"Ah, Evangelism" quoth H.G., who was slightly hard of hearing.

"What the Frak is an Evanston?" wondered Adamu to himself.

"We're not sure," whispered Robbie, "but it is rumored to have eaten the great Ghoul 'Skukie'.

Onward they wandered.

When they reached the end of the time tunnel, they took a fantastic voyage to the bottom of the sea, passed through the Valley of the Gwangi, and entered the Land of the Giants. It was only then they realized they were lost in space. They were one step beyond the outer limits of the Twilight Zone.

"At last we have arrived," said Robbie. "only they of Sterling character can hope to survive"

"Would the juice of the Rudden-Berry help?" asked the doctor with a glint in his eye and a Quark in his voice. "We can affix ourselves to the Ylem of the Universe with our great Sonic Irwin-Allen-Wrench!"

"If this keeps up, we'll need a Careman. Roger?" stated Adamu.

"I am beginning to feel like a Stranger in a Strange Land," said H.G..

"We can't" proclaimed Robbie. "Heinlein still has the copyright."

"Poor bugger," stated Adamu, "coppier or not, he shouldn't be held in bondage."

They had reached a great wall. It was made in layers of precious gems and metals. They followed the wall until they reached a gate. Over it, written etched deeply in a brass plaque, "Pero Mellon A Minnu."

"What in Hades does that say," said Adamu.

"Speak friend and enter," interpreted Robbie.

The gate magically opened at Robbie's words. Inside was a great garden filled with flowers and dancing children. A sign to their right clearly stated, "PLEASE PICK THE FLOWERS" and "PLEASE MACK ON THE GRASS."

page the sixtēn fifth

They had only traveled a short piece when they found themselves under a tree. Nestled in one was a... Banana? A quarter moon? No! A smile. A large, orange cat materialized about the smile. It blinked happily and said, "What's a nice group like you doing in a place like this?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," sighed H. G. rolling his eyes skyward and catching a glimpse of a woman floating through the air with an umbrella.

"It's not my fault," protested Robbie.

"Calm you must be," Adama suggested.

Starbuck, however, was getting nervous. "Commander, get us out of here!"

Adama considered the matter. "I think that we're in worse shape than we thought. We'll just have to go beyond the farthest star."

"Aye, commander," said Robbie, "But the bendersnatchi, they canna take it."

"Perhaps the doctor can be of assistance...."

The Doctor seemed quite put out. "I'm a doctor, not a veterinarian," he complained. He grinned at Adama with brilliant mischievity. "You're the commander, Adama. I think you should face this.... alone."

Adama started to protest, but Robbie shushed him. The robot guide scanned the muffled sky, then led the glitzy beasts through a mirror-like fog and into a forest-ringed clearing.

"Dismount, please," Robbie said in a quiet tone. "We will wait here."

H. G. first noticed the high-pitched, electronic music overhead. The others searched the heavens for its source. Five distinct tones were heard, then vanished. Suddenly . . .

"THEOOOOOOOSH!!!"

Page the Sixth (the REAL page the sixth, not to be confused with earlier and bogus pages the sixth)

"What the frak was that!?"

"Our goal," Robbie answered. He will tell you everything you wish to know about life, the universe, and everything. The Master."

"The master?" Dr. Who said. "What master? Why should we need to talk to a master?"

"You mean you didn't want the answer to life, the universe, and everything?" Robbie asked incredulously. "But everyone who comes to this planet wants the answer to life, the universe, and everything. What else would you be doing here?"

Adams and the Doctor considered dismantling their guide right then and there, but H. G. stopped them. "Since we're here anyway, we might as well meet this master," he said. This was just as well, since the shiny, dandelion-shaped spaceship had settled in the middle of the clearing and a figure emerged.

It wore a tacky red windbreaker and an insipid smile. It approached the three travelers and somewhat unsettled guide and said:

"Good evening. I'm Carl Sagan. I'm an authority on the Cosmos, which is to say everything. Go ahead, ask."

The others stared in amazement. They made no attempt to respond. The Master kept talking anyway.

"Do you realize how many stars there are? Billions and billions! Can you say that?"

"Billions and billions," Adams said flatly.

"No, no," Master Carl said. "more diaphram, say it in the back of your throat. Good! Now wave your arms about and look sincere. Better, better." Soon, the Master had trained all three in the proper articulation of "billions and billions" and was starting them on "Star-stuff." From there, it was on to

the Cosmic Calendar. Finally, a brief lesson in exhibiting a Sense of Wonder while looking at a bluescreen before the special effects people have put anything in. All five, with the fire lizard circling frantically, gesticulated wildly.

Finally, the Master proclaimed them all capable of hosting a multi-billions-and-billions-dollar PBS series, and he climbed back into his spaceship of the mind and disappeared. He left behind 27 copies of "The Dragons of Eden."

"That," said H. G., "was a hell of a man. Do you realize he's been advanced more money for a yet-unwritten novel than I earned for all of my works combined? Amazing."

"Things more amazing are to follow," said Robbie. "You are now ready for the end of your journey."

"You mean there's more?" asked Adam.

"Billions and billions..." muttered the Doctor.

"Amazing! Amazing!" H.G. repeated over and over.

"Come. We must go on," Robbie insisted.

The travellers proceeded on into the East. As they wandered, they were joined by a multitude of...sheep. Shepherds, too. Overhead, voices began to sing, and a point of light appeared in the sky.

The new star swelled brighter and brighter, until the entire sky glowed with its light.

"Behold the 'Star of Wonder,'" Robbie said, as the growing radiance continued to increase. Soon the light was blinding. Then there was...

"WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE . . . ?"

H. Ravenwood



"Why Did It Have to Be...?"

(By H. Ravenwood)

When scanners aboard the OSIRIS indicated the remains of a once-thriving civilisation on the surface of a previously uncharted planet, a fourteen-member survey team commanded by Sentiologist 1/C Tanis and Captain Diana was sent to investigate and prepare for an in-depth archaeological expedition. The ruined city lay in a deep ravine; all that was easily visible was fallen rock and jumbled stone.

As the survey began, Tanis, working some distance from the others, sensed he was being watched. But when he moved to investigate, the ancient stones crumbled beneath him, and he fell into blackness. A centon later, a horrified scream echoed madly from the newly-exposed pit...

Part II

Freya was close enough to hear the scream. Her head jerked up at the first echo, and she was moving before the sound died. "C'mon, Elidor!" The plucky little bast followed his mistress.

"Tanis?" Freya skittered to a halt at the sight of the pit now opened in the small plaza. Elidor meowowed questioningly. Freya took a cautious step, laser drawn...

...And was falling. The stones beneath her chose that moment to give way, tumbling her down into the darkness. Bast claws scratched for purchase, but the smooth rock was merciless to Elidor as well. He fell after the Warrior...

...And landed next to her, unhurt, on four paws, as basts are wont to do. One look into the darkness, however, and the fur on his back stood on edge. Elidor hissed furiously as he leapt and dug his claws into Freya's uniform jacket.

Freya managed to sit up. She glared at the treacherous stones that dared to dump her into this place, then took a look around.

"Well, look who dropped in," drawled a rather sinisterly echoing voice. Tanis stood in a pool of light not twenty feet from where she'd landed, holding a laser in one hand and a torch in the other.

Freya stumbled to an upright position. "Disgusting. Is this whole city built over a pit?"

Tanis's eyes suddenly went wide. Elidor hissed in greater fury. The laser suddenly whipped to her direction and raised for firing -- directly at Freya.

"What? Wait! What are you...?" she shrieked.

The laser fired, striking something very near the indignant, somewhat alarmed Warrior's feet. Elidor hissed again, still clinging to her uniform.

"I know you don't like Warriors much, but..." Freya's voice trailed off as she realised Elidor wasn't making enough noise to account for all the hissing she heard. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she took her first really good look around her -- and blanched.

At her feet was a still-wriggling, but definitely burnt, snake. All around her, disturbing the darkness, were dim moving shapes, long, skinny, hissing shapes that occasionally reared and struck at each other.

"Oh, Lords!" she whispered, momentarily frozen at finding herself surrounded by more snakes than she'd ever seen before -- or ever hoped to see. There were even snakes between her and Tanis,

snakes the man was industriously firing at.

"Tanis, you... How'd you get into this?"

"Same as you, I suppose. Are you going to make use of that laser in your hand, or do I have to protect us both? Look out!"

Freya jumped, just in time. Elidor gave another hiss and dropped from her shirt, driving sharp fangs into the back of the head of a snake that struck at her. "Elidor!"

With pride, the bast dumped the still-twitching body at her feet.

Freya's weapon was already incinerating serpent forms in a small circle around her. "Tanis!" she yelled suddenly.

"What?" he yelled back.

"We'll do better if we're both defending one circle, instead of each of us fighting alone!"

"Right! Why'd ya think I blasted that line between us? Get over here!"

Freya quickly complied, skipping as lightly as possible over the fried bodies between them. Elidor, having done his small part, now clung to her pants leg.

Standing back to back, the Warrior and the archaeologist managed to widen their circle of safety, while the bast continued to hiss his challenge in whichever direction he happened to be facing.

"At least the others'll be looking for us in a little while," Freya remarked after a few centons.

Tanis continued to scan their subterranean prison, careful not to leave the circle of light and the protection of their two lasers. The torches somehow had a minuscule effect on the oppressive darkness threatening to overwhelm them.

"Where do they start looking?" the archaeologist asked sardonically. "I couldn't even see any of the others from up there."

"They'll hear us yelling," she replied. "You yell quite nicely."

"The way things echo around here, they'll probably go in the wrong direction," he muttered in response, ignoring her barb. "There's got to be a way out of here."

"If we can get past the snakes, and our torches provide enough light," Freya said, shivering. "This darkness seems to swallow light whole."

"I'll start looking. You start yelling. We'll see which does more good."

Freya treated him to a glare. He glared back. Then his eyes opened wider. In a blur, the whip she remembered from the night before was out and snapping at her feet, seeming to echo forever through the void surrounding them.

"I'll scream! I'll scream!" Freya screamed at him. "You don't have to use that thing on me!"

Tanis shrugged, laughing half-heartedly. "You missed a little something."

Shocked, Freya noticed another snake body, still wriggling, not far from her feet. Elidor was already investigating the severed halves. "Oh!"

"Brilliant comment for the man who just saved your life."

"Saved my life? Maybe, except this was one of the harmless ones."

Tanis shrugged, refusing to look at her. "Better safe than sorry." He'd already recoiled the whip, and was intently regarding the blackness. "If I remember correctly, this hill slopes down in that general direction." He pointed. "Maybe there's a door, or a passage to the outside. Care to try, or do you want to stay here and yell your head off? Which our little reptilian hosts will probably find as annoying as I do."

One brief glance, a shudder, and Freya was quite willing to follow Tanis. Torches held high, lasers held ready, the man and woman moved cautiously into the farther reaches of their prison. The bast resumed his position on Freya, this time digging into her shoulders and meowrowing warily in every

direction.

* * * * *

The wind was picking up. Alexandra looked up in disgust as sand blew and eddied across the carving she'd so painstakingly brushed clear, leaving it unreadable again.

"Frak!" she exclaimed in annoyance, staring down at the obliterated hieroglyphics. Then she stood up to look around. The rest of the survey team was scattered across the landscape. She gave only a moment's attention to the bright orange sunburst that appeared for a centon before vanishing again. "I know, Thorn, I know," she muttered. "Something is unusual here, but if you don't know what it is, I certainly don't."

"Looks like the wind's destroying all our efforts."

Alexandra turned to see Lieutenant Morgan approaching, his own eyes intent on the scene, ignoring the wind and sand. She merely nodded at the golden-haired man. Words often seemed unnecessary when Morgan was around.

After a moment, he spoke again. "Diana's calling us all in for the day. With this storm brewing, we won't get anything done, and she wants to find Tanis and Freya before things get really bad."

"Bors and Tirus haven't found them, then?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

Morgan said nothing, merely shrugged and shook his head.

There was a faint sound, a grinding of stone on stone. Both Warriors instantly whirled, lasers ready, and stared intently at the ruins. The sound apparently emanated from a wall, but how? Something had both Morgan and Alexandra on edge. Smiling sheepishly at one another, they replaced their weapons.

"Crazy wind. Makes some really strange noises when you least expect them," Alexandra muttered.

Morgan nodded. "Sand on stone, must be." But his gaze kept straying to the wall.

The sound was repeated. Both stared at the wall again, lasers ready at the speed of thought, watching as one of the massive stone blocks slowly began to move toward them, out of its fitted place...

The block's movements stopped, showing a gaping hole into blackness. Two stumbling, dusty figures emerged into the light, blinking.

Tanis glowered at the two Warriors, then back at Freya, who was dusting off her uniform. "What did I say about Warriors who shoot first and ask questions later?"

"They didn't shoot. They were just being safe, rather than sorry," she retorted. "We're still here, aren't we?"

"What happened to you two?" Morgan asked. "Private investigation?"

"We fell into a pit," Tanis snapped, his jaw jutting just enough to tell the Lieutenant to shut up.

Morgan nodded, hiding a small smile of relief -- or amusement. "I'd better inform Captain Diana you two are back. She'll want to call in the search party."

"Search party? Warrior mentality!" Tanis muttered to himself. "As if we couldn't get back by ourselves."

"We almost didn't!" Freya retorted. "I'm glad she did."

Still muttering, Tanis made his way down the hill. The Warriors followed in smothered silence. Elidor began to howl for a long-overdue lunch.

* * * * *

The map was spread out on the table, surrounded by plates, mugs, and a handful of intent listeners. Most of the survey team had finished lunch, but no one was about to return to the site in the face of the gathering storm. Freya munched quietly on leftovers while Tanis talked. He, too, had missed lunch, but somehow he wasn't hungry.

"The Locrians traded extensively in this area," Tanis said, "but their extant writings don't indi-

cate contact with any civilisation in this system. We can assume our city was dead even then."

"What about the Mokyars?" asked Alexandra. "We don't know they travelled this far from the galactic core, but maybe..."

"I've checked every Mokyar tape in the OSIRIS archives," Tanis answered, "and I couldn't find a thing."

Freya downed a last gulp of water. "What about the Mokyar Collections?"

Tanis smiled faintly. "Mythology, superstition, unreliable tales collected from the planets the Mokyars visited. Oddities collected for their amusement value."

"But often important to the civilisations that wrote them," Freya countered.

Tanis turned to the others, his university background creeping forward. "We appear," he said with a somewhat superior smile, "to have someone familiar with the Mokyar Collections." He turned an imperious gaze toward Freya.



Frak, thought the exhausted Lieutenant. Tanis the Wild Adventurer was bad enough; did she have to humour Tanis the Professor, too? Oh, well, she'd been good in school...

"Yes," she replied, gazing back evenly. "I'm familiar with most of the legendary writings from this part of the Galaxy." She continued to stare. Best to face them head-on, she reasoned.

But, to her surprise, Tanis the Professor vanished. The archaeologist leaned across the table toward her, his gaze and voice as intense as those of a child with a wonderful secret.

"Have you read the Frylyte Logs from Amblia?" His eyes searched hard, very hard, for her answer. She thought equally hard, but couldn't quite find it.

He pressed, prompting her. "They were supposedly left behind by an alien traveller who crashed there. The natives were illiterate and could only pass the stories down in verse and tapestry." He spoke rapidly and without pause, eyes still searching. "Finally, a thousand yahrens later, the Mokyars showed up and recorded them. The traveller's name was Frylyte, and he came from a place called Ironfield on..."

"Yes!" Freya's eyes began to glitter with almost the same intensity as Tanis's. "On the planet Crythin. And he travelled with three others, who died along the way!" Tanis nodded enthusiastically as Freya continued. "Their home sun was leaving the main sequence, and they had to find another planet to colonize!"

Tanis's eyes turned sad. "They didn't succeed," he said softly.

Freya's sense of triumph faded at his words, but she felt no sorrow. "Considering how unlikely it is that Frylyte ever existed, I suppose it's nothing to worry about," she said, very nearly believing her own words.

Tanis looked back at her; his eyes when sad were even more intense. He had her unwavering attention when he prompted, "The Seventh Planetfall." He waited for her answer.

"An arid planet, second in a system of eight," she said after a pause. Her voice had an abstract quality, as though her memory was speaking with no help from her conscious mind.

Tanis still prompted. "Remember the Frylyte Tapestry, the symbols for sand and water? The way they were carved on every building?" His voice was hypnotic. The others had been silent for some time; now, they hardly breathed.

Freya said nothing, her eyes staring unfocussed at the air before her as though she could read the answer there if she tried hard enough. After a long moment, Tanis sighed and turned away, as though Freya's silence had destroyed some cherished notion of his. He made to slam his fist on the table, but the motion died, and he rested his forehead against his other hand.

"Byzel," Freya said softly, raising her eyes. Tanis turned, and once again they stared evenly and -- Diana noticed curiously -- challengingly at one another.

"The World Where All Things Speak," he quoted.

Suddenly, sharply, Freya whirled to her left, her right palm slapping loudly on the table. Through the shelter doorway, she saw a red and lopsided sun, almost totally obscured by blowing sand and churning clouds, descending toward a horizon littered with ruins. Ruins, she knew, with graceful, vaguely familiar motifs painstakingly carved on every side, to face every direction. They had looked so wrong on stone. Of course! She'd only known them worked with needle and thread...

Tanis also turned to the view. A big, silly smile started to inch across his face.

"Byzel," said Freya. "Hot damn!"

* * * * *

Alexandra dashed alongside Freya, both Warriors pulling their flight jackets over their heads and faces for protection from the blowing sand.

Frak, Alexandra thought, why'd they have to erect the private quarters so far from the mess? "What in Hades is the big deal about Byzel, anyway?" she asked.

"I'm starting to wonder myself," Freya shouted above the wind. This climate was getting worse by the micron! "I think I liked it better as mythology!"

They sprinted past the foil windscreens guarding the shelter door and bolted inside. The walls, ceiling, everything buzzed and rattled. Sergeant Wilson looked up expectantly, then sighed with disappointment.

"Fine welcome," Alexandra teased.

"Thought you were the search party," Wilson replied apologetically. He nervously fingered a surface comlink. "The com's all screwed up, and we can't reach Bors and Tirus to tell them we found you!" -- he indicated Freya -- "and Tanis."

"They're still out there!?" Freya's irate shriek attracted attention from the shelter's other occupants. Even Tanis turned to stare at her.

Wilson shrugged. "They'll be all right, I guess."

"You *guess!*!?" Freya hollered. "That sleazy snake and that miserable idiot are out there in what could become the worst sandstorm our species has ever witnessed, and you *guess* they'll be all right!?" She slammed her jacket onto a couch and followed it down. "Those twits couldn't survive a strong breeze."

Tanis watched intently, but kept his silence. Alexandra tossed her jacket next to Freya's. "You worry too much," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Alexandra replied, plopping down next to Freya.

An odd thump resounded against the door.

"Maybe that's them," Wilson said, reaching for the door latch.

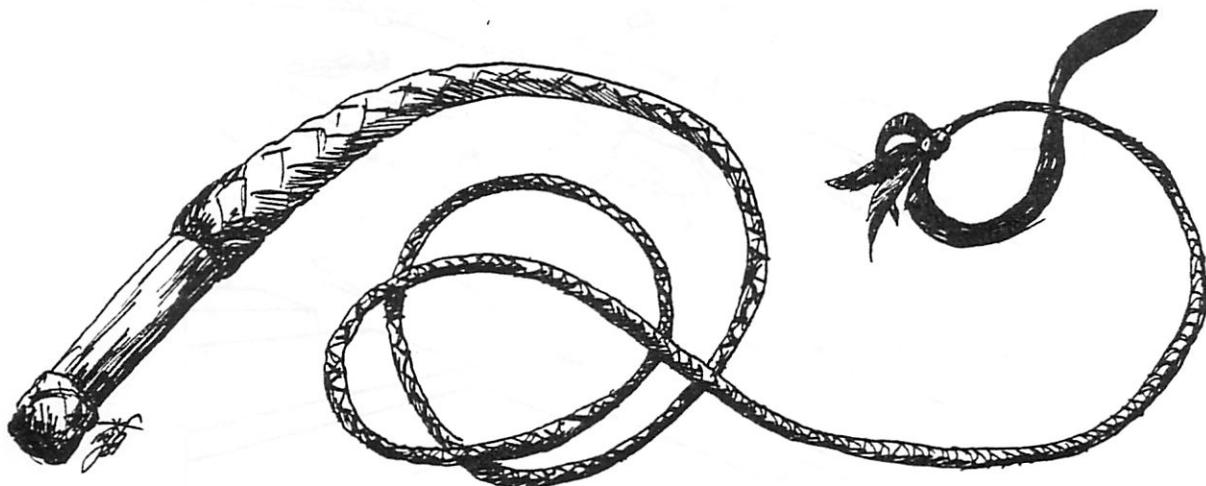
He opened the door. Alexandra gasped softly. Tanis jumped to his feet, followed immediately by Freya, and crossed the room in a few quick strides.

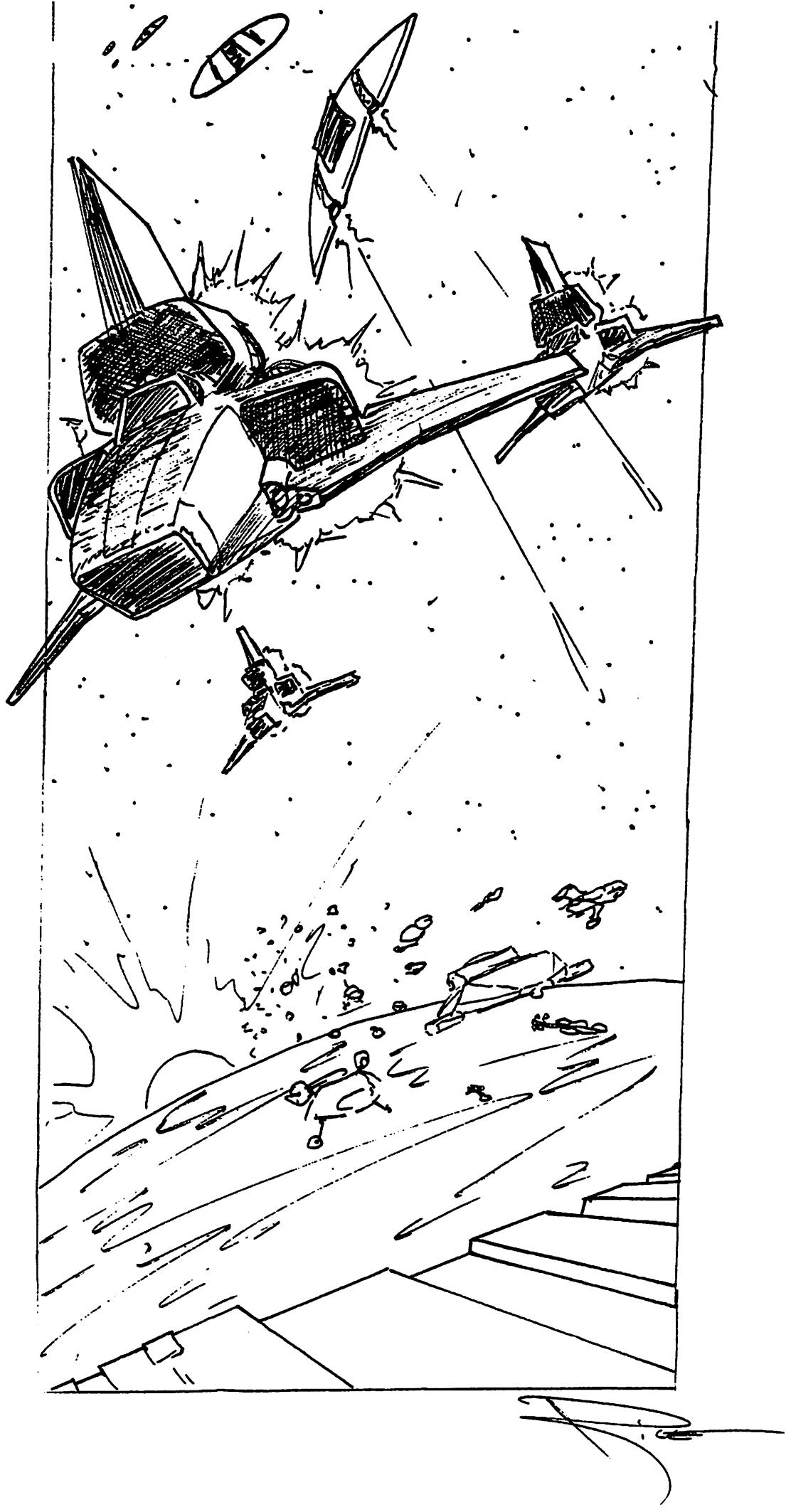
"They... They..." Tirus grabbed at Wilson's shirt, missed, and lurched through the doorway. His uniform was shredded, his skin covered with grit and sand and thin trickles of blood. He weaved unsteadily.

Tanis caught him by the arms. "'They' what?" he demanded.

Tirus looked up, his eyes glazed. "They...got...him..." he whispered as he sank to the ground.

(To be continued.)





...Snakes?

mary jean holmes



"...Snakes?"

(By Mary Jean Holmes)

This place is bizarre.

I can't really think of any better way to describe it. In very many ways, the people of the OSIRIS and their customs are much like those of humankind at home -- that galaxy far, far away, remember? -- but in others, they're vastly different.

Take this business of keeping a menagerie on board a starship, for instance -- on board a starship! Have you ever heard of such nonsense? Okay, I'll grant you the OSIRIS is big, but where do they dump the cat -- pardon me, *bast* -- box litter? Do they have regular collection points? And as far as I can tell, none of these folks have bothered to neuter the things. One of these days, they're going to go down into the little-used regions of their ship and find they've got a population explosion of critters.

And what critters! I thought I'd seen my share of odd animals, but they've got a few on this ship that are weirder'n any I've ever seen before. And let me tell you, it's pretty darn unnerving to go strolling along a corridor, minding your own business, and suddenly find yourself confronted by a canine as big as you are, or a little purple lizard-beastie flying straight for your face.

I've got nothing against pets, mind you -- on the ground. But the very thought of keeping one aboard a starship gives me the crawling nervies. Even the notion of pets...

That's one thing I find peculiar about this galaxy; all the inhabitants I've encountered thus far have been human, or reasonably human-like. Where are the other species, the other races, the other intelligent life-forms who must inevitably reside here? I hear talk about organic Cylons on occasion, and have caught a rumour or two concerning beings less pleasant, but I've never actually seen them. I doubt that any of these people have, either.

In my...uh...neighbourhood, it's hard to tell what's sapient from what isn't. Since the buying and selling of sapient beings is not only highly illegal but also morally repulsive to me, the idea of keeping a pet has never really entered my mind.

Besides, I think I'm allergic to fur.

The crew, however... They're something else. Then again, maybe not. There're a few animals among them, too. Freya -- who has a wonderful, if somewhat off-the-wall, sense of humour -- talks about "daggits" who are definitely non-canine. Dewy-eyed, drooling, glued-to-your-back fellows who are too dense to know when they aren't wanted around. I've known enough of that type, and have been fortunate enough to have avoided those who run around the OSIRIS. At least, so far. I've been warned, however. I know who they are, and plan to keep my eyes open for them.

People are people, in any case, and these aren't any different from those I knew back home. There are the strong ones -- people like Diana and Freya, who know who they are, what they are, and what they want out of this life. There are the gentler few, the quiet folk -- Mara, for instance, who is proving to be a patient and excellent teacher -- and one mustn't forget the crazies and innocents. People in all their spectral variations are here, similarities of personality that remind me so much of friends I had back home that, at times, it becomes painful for me to be with them.

It strikes me, therefore, that the one individual on this ship who reminded me most strongly of home should have upset me to the point where I'd want to avoid him utterly. Right?

Wrong. And that's what's so bizarre about it. There's this guy... Wait, let me explain things from the beginning.

Although I still feel pretty useless in my day-to-day living on the OSIRIS, I find there are factions of the crew more bored than I am. They'll clutch at anything even slightly different as a means of allaying their interminable tedium. I manage to find respite from my own problems by hauling myself and my guitar down to the lounges on a regular basis. I don't even need to announce my arrival; within moments, someone'll come over, followed by a few others, and soon I have a "choir" before me. Oh, well, it's better than sitting around like a vegetable.

On the day in question, I was in the process of tuning my instrument. The strings weren't cooperating, and I was getting irked. I was about to give the whole thing up as useless when something went sorta squish under my fingers. I jumped. Wrapped around the neck of the guitar was one of the OSIRIS's many critters, a small, garish-orange snake-thing with wings.

"What the hell is that?" I demanded of Mara, who had accompanied me down to the club area. I didn't sound very gracious about the intrusion; I'm not too fond of being snuck up on, especially by bizarre little beasties.

Mara glanced at it; the thing sorta wavered in and out of sight. "That's Thorn," she supplied after a moment. "Looks like he's gotten loose again."

"Well, would you tell whoever owns it to keep it away from my instruments? The blasted thing nearly gave me heart failure!"

Mara nonchalantly shooed at it. It reluctantly unwound itself from the neck and fluttered away, winking out of sight as it went. I grumbled something under my breath about the idiocy of keeping pets on a starship, and finished tuning the guitar.

A while later, one of the younger Warriors dragged in a seemingly endless list of words he and some friends had written to an old and nauseatingly familiar tune. He insisted, daggit-like, that I try singing it for him; unwisely, I agreed.

After ten verses, I dropped out and let the rest of them do what passed for singing as the song dragged on. The thing had half a million stanzas, each one getting more and more obscure, and therefore less and less humorous. I considered forcing one of the strings to break in order to end the tedious sing-along, but they wouldn't comply.

Bored, I started looking around the room for an excuse -- any excuse -- to get out of my position as choirmaster. There were a few people hanging around the room's perimeter who I recognised from past encounters. I knew they'd be more than willing to spend the evening with me, but I wasn't in the mood to listen to endless tales about routine flights or even duller, over-embroidered fantasies about their past lives, so I pretended not to see when one of them tried to wave me over. The very thought of fighting off some twit bent on making a pass at me turned my stomach. I continued my evidently fruitless search for escape.

Any group of people will have its loners, and this bunch was no exception. About then, I happened to notice one of them I hadn't noticed before. I blinked.

God, he looked familiar! I knew I'd seen him somewhere before, but I couldn't for the life of me remember where. One thing I knew for sure, though -- it hadn't been in this galaxy. I kept staring at him on and off for maybe five minutes -- excuse me, microns -- or is it centons? Hectares? Cyclons? Hell with it, minutes. I finally turned back to my bunch of off-key singers, who were winding down that bloody song. At last! My fingers ached. I stretched them and sucked on a finger that was getting a nasty blister on it.

"Who'sh dat guy ovah deh?" I asked Mara around my mouthful of thumb.

She squinted across the room, glad of an excuse not to look at me. She knew I hated that song, mostly because of the overused tune, but it wasn't her fault I'd suffered through it. One of the daggits couldn't understand "no" in his language, my language, or half a hundred dialects I'd picked up over the years.

"Who? Which one?"

"The scruffy-looking one." I examined the blister, and considered breaking it. It hurt like hell.

"Which scruffy-looking one? Jones?"

"No, not him. I know who he is. The other one."

Mara gave me one of those looks, like an exasperated teacher with a dull-witted student. "You'll have to be a bit more specific, Kari. Half the people on this ship are scruffy-looking."

That was true, and I tended to fall squarely into that category. I hadn't brought any extra clothes with me in the life pod, and Alix hadn't had the forethought to send my luggage along, so my wardrobe was severely limited. I've scrounged up a few things by begging and borrowing, but it seems no one else on the OSIRIS is quite my size. Too short, too thin, too heavy, always too something. They offered me a uniform, but there's no way they're ever going to get me into one. I abhor the military. Mara's remark was a well-timed reminder that I'd have to find some proper materials and

make my own clothes -- and soon.

"The fellow sitting in the corner by himself," I clarified. "The one reading."

Mara squinted again, then made a small sound of understanding. "Oh, he's one of the people from Sentiology. Tanis, I think."

I looked at her sideways. "What, no rank?" I quipped.

"He's a civilian," Mara shrugged. "Why? Are you interested in him?"

"Sorta."

She tsked at me expressively, almost laughing. "Kari, really! I didn't think you were the type. What would Alix say?"

I gave her a mock-angry look, threatening to hit her with the guitar. "Nothing, you nerf-brain. That's not what I meant. He looks familiar, 's all. Tanis, huh?" I made a face.

The name meant absolutely nothing to me. I clicked my tongue and went back to playing. The thumb still hurt, but it wasn't bad enough to give me an excuse to beg off. "Wish I could remember where I've seen that face before." I shrugged. It'd come to me, sooner or later -- probably in the middle of the night, as a bad nightmare.

The "choir" came back from the bar, interrupting my thought. They were looking for another song to sing.

"Anybody got any suggestions?"

"How about 'What Do You Do With...?'"

"Not that one again!"

"Well, then, how about..."

"Forget it!"

I attempted to keep out of the argument, putting innocently with the strings. Another voice joined in the conversation.

"Hey, has anyone seen Thorn? He got out of my cabin again."

"He was here a little while ago, but he took off again."

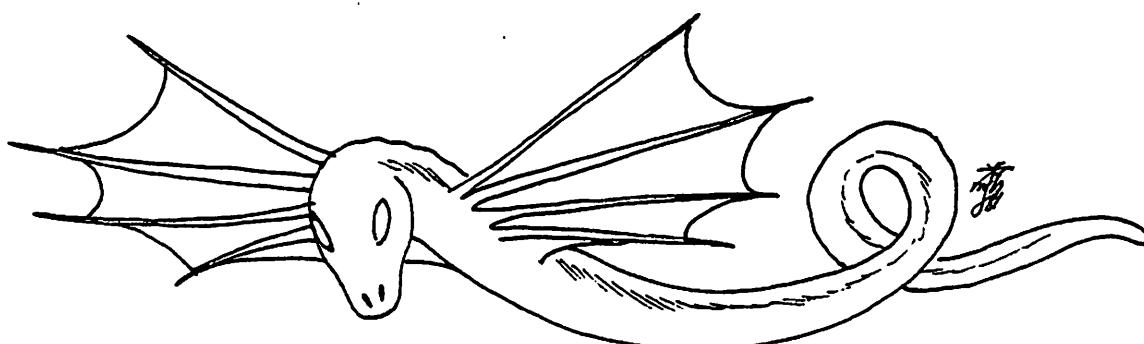
"Did you see where he went?"

"Are you kidding? Maybe you should try..."

There was a blood-curdling scream from across the room.

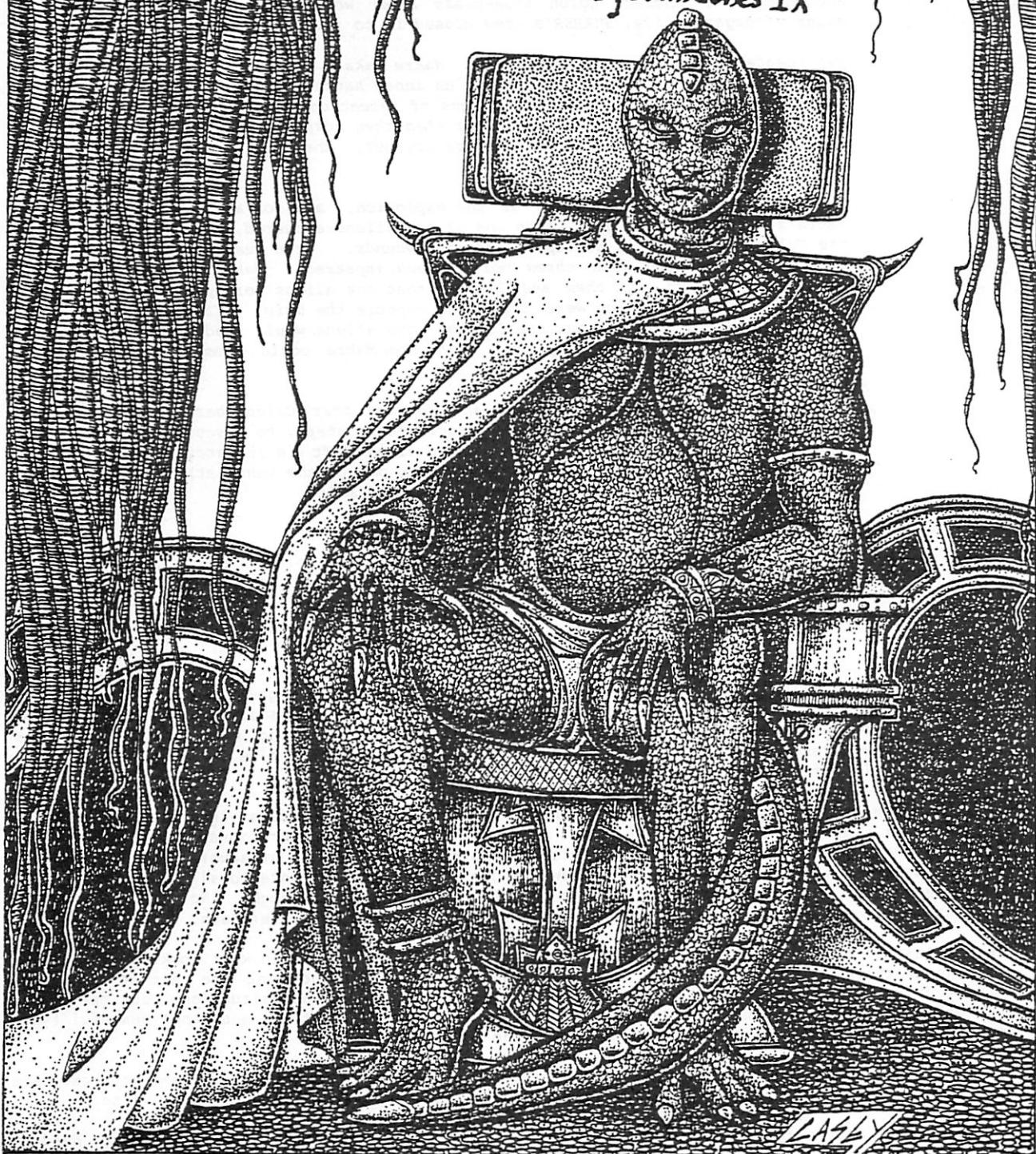
"Never mind, I think I've found him."

I don't think I've ever seen anyone move quite so fast. It was like watching a human equipped with hyperdrive, but I couldn't see why this Tanis guy had taken off so quickly. All that little orange snake was doing was sitting in the middle of his table, looking ever so innocent. Strange person, this man. One of these days, I'm going to figure out why he looks so blasted familiar...



Allies

by John Jones IX



"Allies"

(By John Jones IX)

Once there were the People, the reptilian race who created the robots called Cylons. When SHARER, a small scout ship of the People, encountered an ancient Cylon SEGA-class liner whose debris showed signs of organic life, SHARER's crew closed in to investigate.

Nai (Captain) Urun and his Technician, Makra Dakal, crossed to the liner, where Urun cut his way through an inner hatch. When he and Makra entered the ship, they found signs of recent combat, and also evidence that the ship was even older than they suspected. While examining a storeroom, Urun heard Makra cry out, then there was a sudden explosion.

A Cylon emerged from the smoke of the explosion, and for a moment Makra's life was in danger. Then one of the aliens appeared, killed the Cylon, and promptly collapsed from its wounds. Urun was giving the alien first aid when three more aliens appeared. Makra made telepathic contact with them and learned that the aliens were prisoners of the Cylons, and were trying to capture the ship. If the People would aid them against the Cylons, the aliens would lead the way to one of their own telepaths, with whom Makra could communicate.

The party soon met two more aliens and learned that Cylons barred the way ahead. The seven fighters retraced their steps, to discover that the Cylons had murdered the wounded alien left in the store-room. The alien leader took his party into one of the ventilation ducts leading from the storeroom deeper into the ship.

Part VIII

Urun soon knew the alien leader had been an optimist to believe the duct gave an easy passage. Urun and four of the five aliens couldn't stand fully erect, but the duct was also too wide to let them brace themselves securely on either side. The five misfits lurched along in an unstable position halfway between standing and crouching. This slowed them down, at a time when every lost minute made the location of the Cylons they were hunting less predictable.

The awkward gait also made for extra noise, until it was like being inside a vigourously-beaten ceremonial drum; this bothered Urun even more. Cylons' audio receptors were more sensitive and less easily degraded than organic ears; making this much noise could cost the attackers the surprise they would almost certainly need badly. Urun drew his gun three times -- once to slip in a new charge, and twice to make sure the weapon would come out of the holster fast enough. No one except Makra would know this was a sign his nerves were stretched as tight as they'd ever been.

The shortest alien and Makra had no trouble navigating the duct. The alien kept looking around him, even though there was nothing to see except the bare walls of the duct and the rest of the party. He looked like someone more than a little out of his element in a combat situation, but making the best effort he could. Urun knew the pose well; he'd seen many scientists and other peaceful types among the People dragged into mortal combat with the Cylons.

Makra, on the other hand, was striding along with her hand on the butt of her gun and her head held high. She looked as if slaughtering Cylons was her notion of the best fun in the universe.

Indeed, there was no reason why she shouldn't look that way. There was no more immediate need in

prospect for her telepathy, so she could be another keen shooting eye and fast gun hand. She seemed blithely free of worries about Urun's safety; he hoped she wasn't free of a proper concern for her own.

It seemed to Urun that the seven allies lurched along the duct for a distance great enough to take them from the SEGA out to SHARER. Several times, they got down on their bellies and crawled past ventilation grilles. Only once was there anything unusual to see through the grilles -- a compartment with one bulkhead bulged outward from an explosion, with two corpses on the deck, one Cylon and one alien. The Cylon was nearly intact, but the alien was so thoroughly mangled it was impossible to tell much about the race's internal anatomy from the corpse.

Bursts of vibration and belling echoes from distant explosions kept reaching them as they moved along. The fighting elsewhere was obviously still going on. Urun began to wonder if the alien leader knew exactly where he was going or what he was going to do when he got there. With a leader from the People, he would have been ready to ask bluntly. With the communications problem here, that would only cause delay and perhaps sow more distrust, which could be more dangerous than a leader's mistakes. Urun stiffened his tail and kept going.

Soon after this, the leader made an unmistakable sign to halt. Then he got down on hands and knees and crept forward. He stopped to peer down through a grille set in the floor of the duct. Everyone froze, not moving so much as a finger, and hardly daring to breathe. The leader pulled a small pair of wirecutters from a pouch on his belt and cut away a section of the grille's wire.

When he'd finished, the black-faced alien passed forward to him three gun charges wired together. The leader twisted the knob at the end of one charge, then dropped the whole package through the hole cut in the grille. As it vanished, he threw himself backward, landing on top of one of his comrades. Everyone took this as a signal to flatten themselves on the floor.

A metallic clunk -- faint and far off, as the three charges hit the deck below.

A shrill siren's wail -- a Cylon giving the alarm.

The whine and hiss of a Cylon's energy beam eating into metal -- and beyond the grille, the floor of the duct glowed.

Then a crashing explosion, as the gun charges went off like a bomb.

If Urun hadn't been protecting his earholes, the blast might have deafened him. As it was, his head still rang like a gong. The walls and floor of the duct added to the din, flexing and jerking with a hideous clang and booming. Blue and green smoke poured up through the grille opening, until Urun could barely see the alien leader ahead. It was impossible to see, hear, or even imagine in detail what might be happening in the compartment below.

One thing seemed likely -- there were no fully functional Cylyons left down there.

The alien leader seemed to have the same notion. He crept forward to the edge of the grille, tried to peer through the smoke, then shrugged. He cut away more of the wire, pushed it aside until there was an adequate opening, then put both hands on the edge and swung himself down out of sight. A moment later, they heard a shout and the clang of his boots on the deck below. From the way the aliens looked at each other, Urun concluded everything was clear below.

A second alien dropped through the hole and landed safely, then the black-faced one went down. Urun crawled forward to follow himself.

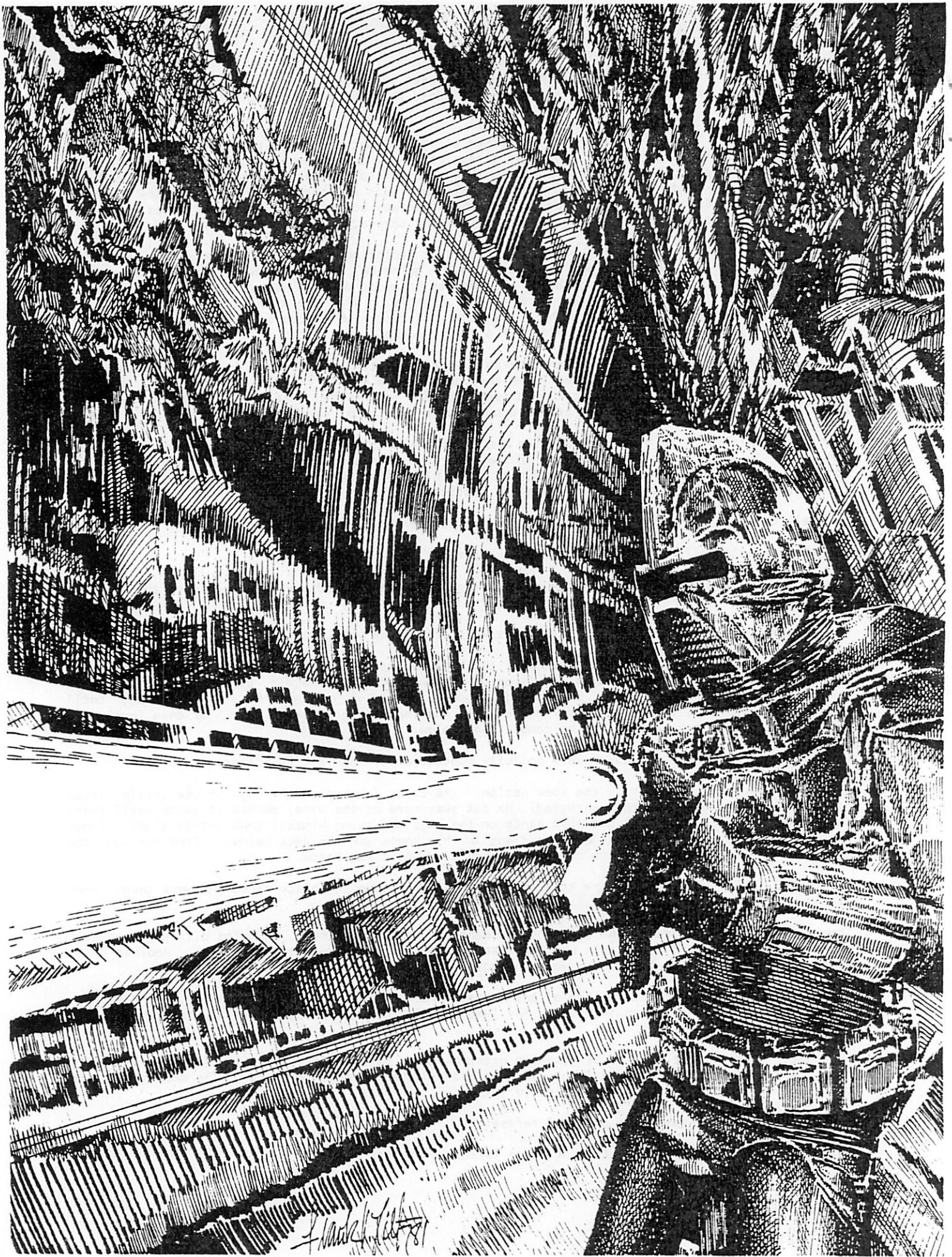
Then a Cylon beam and one of the aliens' guns went off almost together. A Cylon disintegrated with a hideous crackling and sizzling, which almost drowned out the scream of the alien. Another Cylon beam crackled, and again the duct beyond the hole began to glow and smoke.

"Makra! Jump!" Urun shouted. The aliens seemed more fragile-boned than the People, who'd evolved from a race of cliff-climbing lizards. Any jump or fall the aliens could survive, the People could manage easily.

For once, Makra didn't have to be given an order twice. As Urun flattened himself on the shaking floor, she and one of the aliens leapt over him and vanished through the hole. The moment he heard them landing, he motioned the last alien to follow.

The alien gave an unmistakable growl of refusal.

Urun glared. This wasn't the time or place to show distrust.



Mark Kliban
1981

It also wasn't the time or place to be stubborn out of nothing more than racial pride. Urun gripped the edge of the hole with one hand, taking his whole weight on one arm to leave his gun hand free. He'd trained with weights and bars until this sort of thing was so easy he could even make good shooting while dangling.

It was a good thing. As he got ready to drop down, another Cylon entered the compartment, weapon already raised to firing position. The wreckage of its ruined comrades slowed its advance, but not its trigger-finger. The black-faced alien reeled as the beam took off his leg, while the alien leader dove for the deck so suddenly that he knocked Makra off her feet on the way down. She landed hard, and for a moment seemed half-stunned, a motionless target for the Cylon.

In that moment, Urun fired. So did the black-faced alien, as he fell to the deck almost on top of his dead comrade. The Cylon took one shot in the belly, while the second blew off half of one arm. It reeled forward, tripped over a fragment of its comrade, and fell on top of the black-faced alien. The mangled arm was thrust out in front of it, and the sharp end drove into the alien's chest like a spearpoint. The alien writhed briefly, then blood flowed out of his mouth, and he was still.

Urun dropped to the deck as Makra stood up, shaking her head but apparently unhurt. The last alien followed, a heartbeat before the duct tore loose at one end and swung down like an executioner's blade.

Urun, Makra, and two of the aliens hit the deck again, but the last alien was either too slow or too close to the arc of the duct's swing. The free end slammed into the back of his head, hurling him across the compartment. He landed with his head at such an angle to his body, and the back of his skull such a ruin, that it was unnecessary to wonder if he was dead.

The four survivors picked themselves up and looked at each other. Urun did not need Makra's telepathy to tell him the aliens were badly shaken by the savagery of the fight and the loss of three of their comrades so quickly.

He didn't blame them. This fight reminded him too much of the way things had gone too often between the People and the Cyrons, until the People could no longer bear the losses and let the Cyrons build their great victory out of all the little ones.

Were the aliens going to be allies against the Cyrons, or merely a new set of victims for the killer machines?

Even if they had potential as allies, would he and Makra live long enough to make that potential real?

That was an even harder question to answer, since it depended largely on luck and the number of Cyrons still aboard the SEGA. Both were unknown and perhaps unknowable quantities.

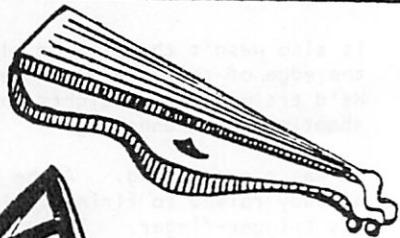
And he and Makra couldn't risk doing anything with any chance of making them look cowardly or even cautious in the eyes of the aliens. This wasn't a matter of racial pride. Proving the People were as tough and courageous as the aliens was the only hope for any alliance worthy of the name, and probably the only way to keep from being shot in the back as too dangerous to have around. Urun knew how ruthless you sometimes had to be in disposing of unreliable people in a firefight.

The alien leader looked at the other three survivors, took a deep breath, and waved his gun toward the compartment door. Urun and Makra fell in behind him, and the last alien brought up the rear. Out of the smoke and the slaughterhouse smells they went, four allies who had been seven, on their way to the next battle.

(To be continued.)



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